

Trinity 2, Matins

Genesis 27: 1-40 Mark 6: 1-6.

Mother Emma

The rueful saying, "You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family", might refer to either of our readings today. As we hear of Jacob stealing his father's blessing through trickery, or Jesus declaring, "A prophet is not without honour", except, we are reminded that human difficulties and misunderstandings can begin at home and be deep-seated and painful.

The story of Isaac giving Jacob his blessing forms an integral and necessary step in the story of the people of Israel (the new name later given to Jacob). Without the blessing, which confers superiority and success upon Jacob, the whole narrative of the Israelites and their conquest of the local people, would have no clear foundation in their historic understanding of themselves as God's Chosen People. Yet the story is one which makes us recoil - the tricking of an elderly, blind and dying man by his own wife and child into giving his final blessing to the younger, rather than the older son. Although some scholars have thought that the details of Jacob's fake hairy hands suggest this was meant to be a comic tale, there is in fact no indication that the narrator was any less shocked than we are.

How do we reconcile ourselves to these deeply and distressingly human tales of greed and deceit, embedded within the story of God's saving purpose?

For centuries people have tried to find a way to make Jacob's action palatable to modern sensibilities – perhaps by implying that his general behaviour was more godly than Esau's and he therefore deserved the blessing more, but this is not a story with a happy ending for anyone.

As next Sunday we shall be celebrating the Feast of St Thomas the Apostle, with its appointed readings, I can give you a quick summary of what we would have heard in the regular cycle of readings, continuing the story of Jacob. After Esau receives his father's much less powerful blessing, Esau swears to kill Jacob for his treachery once the mourning period for their father is over. Rebekah, their mother, urges Jacob to run away and stay with his uncle in her native country, returning only when Esau's anger has calmed down, which she predicts will not be long. This will prevent her from losing one son to murder and the other condemned as a fratricide. In fact, Jacob is gone for twenty years, and his mother dies before his return, so they never see one another again.

Deep grief has come out of the story, from Isaac's final hours knowing that his wife and son have tricked him, to Rebekah's loss, and Jacob's twenty years spent in exile. Esau has been given the land later known as Edom, the rocky hill country near to Israel, which is far less rich, and his descendants will live there forever, subject, though closely tied to the people of Israel. Is this a "true" story?

While appreciating that there are many Christians for whom the Bible is to be taken literally, those of us in a more liberal theological tradition would say that it forms part of the "foundation myth" for the people of Israel, but is important in what it tells us about a life lived with God.

The compilers of Genesis, writing when Israel was an established entity, are seeking to explain the relationship they observe between Israel and Edom, to encourage one another in their understanding of themselves as the Chosen People and how this might have come about. There was still at that time a clear line between those who lived as hunters in the hill-country and the shepherds and cultivators on the plains of Israel, and the depiction of Esau as a wild and physical

hunter, and Jacob as the more sensitive shepherd, also tries to crystallise the realities they saw around them.

As Fr Peter commented in my confirmation classes many years ago, the Bible describes the world of a people seized with a passion for God. Its writers observe the sin, greed and deceit of the human condition, just as we see around us today, and yet throughout everything they are aware that “God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year”.

Jacob suffers as a result of his deceit, through his exile and loss – and as we may hear later in the summer, by the loss of his favourite wife and, for a while at least, his favourite son. Yet his later experiences also show a deep connection between him and heaven, and a remorseful desire to make amends and serve his God.

God’s Kingdom on earth is not yet come, and we might say that it is only with Christ’s coming that we see the first signs of the Kingdom.

Still, in our second reading, we hear that Jesus’ own family and neighbours are unwilling to believe in the signs he performs and the wisdom he demonstrates, because of their familiarity with him as one of them, and therefore, we assume, their expectation that he is as much driven by human frailties and failures as others.

Probably many of us are reading or watching the news at the moment with increasing disbelief at the greed, cruelty and deceit which seems to be prevalent in today’s world, yet if we are honest, perhaps we can see that it is hard work for us, even as Christians, to ensure that we always put the needs of others before our own, as Christ taught us.

The writers of the Scriptures were not idealists, viewing the world through rose-tinted spectacles. They could see the same desire to “look after number one” in their fellow humans as we can see today; the failings of humanity primarily to seek the good of others and to create that Kingdom of perfect justice and peace, in which every human being is treated with equal respect and love.

Yet they also saw, that despite the selfishness and weaknesses of humanity, God was working his purpose out, and we can be certain, that through the revelation brought by Christ himself, we each have the chance to repent of our own tendency to self-orientation and to work with him in bringing in his Kingdom.