

6th June 2025, Matins

Genesis 29: 1-20 and Mark 6: 7-29

Mother Emma

Very occasionally, when presented with Lectionary readings like those we have just heard, it is tempting to throw up one's hands in despair at the thought of trying to unpack them in a way which is relevant and accessible for a modern audience.

There is remarkably little about the ancient story of Jacob and Rachel which seems appropriate or even comprehensible to 21st century city dwellers in Britain today. After stealing his brother's inheritance, Jacob, the son of Isaac, has run away and his mother has encouraged him to look for a bride amongst his closest relatives... When he arrives and finds Rachel, who may have been his first cousin, or even his niece, according to the rather confused wording of the King James translation, he is delighted. Falling in love with her, he agrees to serve her father for seven years in order to win her hand in marriage... and so ends today's reading. However, by next Sunday, things will have moved on considerably in the story, so perhaps I could remind you of what happens immediately after our reading, when Laban, Rachel's father, tricks Jacob into marrying Leah, his eldest daughter, and then only agrees to give him Rachel as well if he works for a further seven years.

Laying aside the thorny issues of consanguineous marriage and polygamy, fear is struck into a vicar's heart by the idea of marrying someone to the wrong person – indeed the church demands that veils are put back before a wedding, and only recently changed the ruling (thanks to electric lighting) that weddings could not take place after dusk for fear of mistakes or trickery!

What are we, today, in this place, to take from a story which, although elements of it may still be recognised in other parts of the globe, appears to fly in the face of both religious and civil law in this country? If we use the preacher's fallback of moving instead to the other reading, we learn that the wife of King Herod bears a grudge against Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, for calling out their unlawful marriage, and persuades her daughter to trick the King into giving her John's head on a platter as a reward for her pleasing public dancing. This is also hopefully not a scenario most of us will encounter every day!

Yet, we are told in Paul's letter to Timothy that all Scripture is given for our learning, and so we must delve more deeply into what we might take away from these two vivid if alien-sounding stories... If we understand the Scriptures to be an account of human beings filled with a passion for God, who are, nonetheless, still human beings, we can see a broader picture of people whose character and nature remain clearly recognisable to us, even if their circumstances are undeniably different. The things which, deep down, tempt us and inspire us, the vices and virtues of human existence have changed little, if at all.

Human beings are capable of great honour – of the moral strength and courage to speak out against what is wrong, like John the Baptist – and of great love, like that which drew Jacob to serve a total of fourteen years in order to win the girl of his choice. On the other hand, I think it is fair to say that most if not all humans will experience the desire for power and authority over something or someone, even if only a few actually aspire to world domination! It is also rare never to find

ourselves caught up in deceit, ranging from the occasional “white lie” to more complex deceptions to prevent people from seeing us as we truly are?

Social media has perhaps normalised this falsifying of our identities, whether simply by airbrushing a photograph, or for some, actively pretending to be someone completely different. The vulnerability of honestly allowing others to glimpse our private emotions or difficulties can be seen when every revelation becomes a talking-point for the world at large through social or traditional media, as we have seen this week.

Why, we might wonder, does Laban go to such lengths to marry Jacob by trickery to his elder daughter, rather than simply explaining to him (as he does after the event) that it is normal custom for the elder daughter to be married first, and that he can also marry Rachel afterwards? Perhaps because this deception gives him the power to tie Jacob in to another seven years of what we understand to be free labour. But power also makes us fearful, as we see in the case of King Herod, caught between the fear of those who will rebel against him if he harms John the Baptist, and those who will despise him for failing to honour his promise to the daughter of Herodias.

In the end, the relationship between Laban and Jacob will also break down, leaving Jacob to run away once again, this time taking his wives, children and livestock, and we wonder if all this was caused by the initial deception.

We live in an age where the lust for power and the relative unimportance of rigorous honesty seem to be leading global relations into more and more unnerving and complex situations. We are no longer sure what or who to trust, and perhaps we all feel that seizing a little bit of control for ourselves will help us to feel more secure. God knows our human nature; he knows the temptations which befall us, but he also stands beside us when we speak the truth in love, and when we approach others in humility, integrity and openness, as Paul encourages us in his Epistles. Christianity is, in this, as so often, counter-cultural.

Do we have the courage to speak out, not perhaps against those who have stolen their brother’s wives, or tricked us into marrying their daughters, but against all who would have us believe that that human power or deceit are the only ways to find stability in today’s world. If, as we assert in the Creed, we believe in the Almighty power of God, our lives could reflect our sense of his power alone ruling and guiding us, and our calling to speak his Truth.