

## **Jacob and Esau**

**Genesis 25:19-34 (story continues in Genesis 27:1-43)**

**St Matthias' Holy Communion 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017 John Beckett**

*Theme music intro to 'The Archers' and 'Eastenders'*

Welcome to the next episode of the Abraham family's saga! It's a cracker – full of family rivalry, deceit, arguments, even death threats this week.

Like all the soaps, we're drawn in by either finding ourselves breathing a sigh of relief that our family isn't like that – or maybe we are uncomfortably reminded as the plot line gets close to our reality.

The episode we're looking at today may hit home harder since it is God's Word after all – and it isn't fiction, it's actually our own Christian family story...

Abraham, you will remember is the key Old Testament example of faithfulness and trust in God. At the age of 75 he obeys God's call and sets off in faith from home to an unknown land. He and his wife Sarah endure 25 patient years of childlessness - disappointment, frustration, & shame - as they wait faithfully for God's foundational promise to be fulfilled - that they would have a child, so that Abraham would be the father of many nations, as numerous as the stars of the sky, so that you and I and all people on earth may be blessed by God.

The next part of the family history we are looking at today shows us how God continues to honour his promise even though he has to work with some very flawed characters – a sort of back handed reassurance for each of us.

Isaac at the age of 40 marries his beautiful cousin Rebecca – it's a lovely story. Sadly, she is also "barren" – echoes of Sarah's plight (and a situation repeated again later with Rachel, their son Jacob's wife).

Isaac and Rebecca also have to wait 20 years for a child, which no doubt contributes to the tensions between them. We pick up the story with Rebecca at last knowing the blessing of finding herself pregnant. Indeed, a double blessing. She is to give birth to twins! Though the double blessing becomes double trouble.

Let's remind ourselves what happened:

The babies jostled each other within her.

The word jostled is a bit tame here – actually means crashed violently into each other.

You might have or have had that sort of relationship with your siblings – where you always seem to crash into one another, clash with one another?

But normal or not it was certainly disturbing for her. It was before the days of ultrasound scans so she didn't know she was carrying twins at all. But after enquiring of the Lord, what was going on – we think possibly by going to ask one of God's prophets – God tells her:

'Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you will be separated;  
one people will be stronger than the other,  
and the elder will serve the younger.'

So now she knows that not only is she carrying twins, but they're fighting in the womb is just a foretaste of what is to come.

Esau (which probably means hairy) is the first to be born – and indeed he is very hairy – and red headed at that. Being the first born was a key role in that society, and was the one who would inherit a double portion of the father's estate and also receive his blessing.

Jacob come next – born in a most unusual way – one hand first - much more sensible I always think – that's how lambs and calves are often born – Ruth had to insist I did not bring any lambing ropes into the delivery suite when our two were born!

But Jacob does not just come one hand first, but with one hand clutching at his brother's heel – symbolic of what was to come – indeed he was named Jacob – which means *he grasps the heel, or the supplanter* – it's also a Hebrew idiom for *he deceives*,

As the boys grew up the differences between them became apparent, and certainly did not help their rivalry.

Esau the hot-blooded redhead became an athletic Hunter. Jacob the crafty schemer was quieter and enjoyed cooking at home.

Think Ray Mears and Raymond Blanc.

Sadly for his family, Isaac was not the man his father was.

He was weak. Rather than trusting God, he had a tendency to trust in physical strength and skill, he was also swayed by his love for food.

So we are told simply and sadly: Isaac loved Esau. But Rebecca loved Jacob.

They broke Cardinal Parenting Rule number one: love your children equally.

Some of us might have been wounded by having parents whose love appeared to be partial as was Isaac and Rebecca's.

Most parents I know do love their children equally, but it can be harder to demonstrate that to them! One child may be an Angel the other terror. Perhaps our attitudes to parenting change over time with experience, or times change. A friend of Ruth's commented that as the older daughter she always had to fight to get various privileges as she grew up, whereas her younger brother seemed to have them all handed to him on a plate .

And even if you do not have children of your own, if you have a sibling, you will know of the tensions that develop as we can find ourselves consciously or not vying for our parent's attention, for their favour... and it doesn't stop at aged 18!

So what next for Jacob and Esau: we pick it up verse 29

<sup>29</sup>Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. Esau as ever, brawn before brain, is hungry. He sees some red stew (we're reminded here of another wordplay on names: Esau's other name is Edom, which means red ). So we have the redhead one who is fixated by the red stew.

Esau asks for some of the stew – well demands some: but Jacob reply is so curtly – just three short Hebrew words: translated as “first sell me your birthright.” – its almost as if Jacob had planned in advance this first stage of his plan to supplant his brother.

Sadly for Esau, driven by his stomach like his father, he agrees! He has given up his double portion of his father's estate for a bowl of red lentils

And in a rare moral comment in Genesis, he is severely criticised for it. Indeed, later in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament Esau becomes a symbol of backsliding and faithlessness.

Of course, what we all see, though no comment is made about, is the horrible scheming and ruthless Jacob with his greedy competitive nature.

Worse still is to know that this trickery and deception to get ahead is only part one of his plan.

Do you remember how it goes?

With Esau off hunting, Jacob's mother Rebecca produces a fantastic young goat casserole for Isaac; dresses up Jacob in his brother's clothes, puts hairy goat skins on his arm and neck, and brazen and unashamed Jacob lies to his aged, blind father's face.

His father Isaac is fooled, so that he gives the blessing to Jacob by mistake. The blessing which was always intended for the oldest child Esau.

Not surprisingly, Esau is distraught and angry, threatens to kill his brother. Rebecca helps Jacob to escape to his uncle Laban. It is more than 14 years before they are to meet again 14 years in which Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine when he is roundly tricked by Laban himself in the business of his marriage to Leah and Rachel.

So where does that leave us? If you've ever thought the Bible is full of stories of model living – well, think again.

There will be many of us say you have a great family life – great!

For some of us though, our family relationships have been or still are painful and dysfunctional. The challenges of the failings of Isaac and his family today are not meant to increase our pain or guilt – but rather to be an opportunity for healing.

Often when we think of “healing” we think simply physical healing. Today, I invite you to come honestly before God to begin healing your relationships.

Some of us will know of the mistakes we made in our attempts to love our children equally.

Some of us will have been on the receiving end of mistakes made by our own parents.

I know somebody who, for each of their children's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday presents, gave them a voucher for a weekend of counselling at a Christian healing centre to try to repair some of the mistakes that he knew he and his wife would inevitably have made, however, caring, they were wanting to be.

Some of us may be uncomfortably reminded of the times that we have schemed, plotted, or simply been deceitful in order to get one up on our brothers and sisters – or maybe our work colleagues? – to look better, to get more attention, to get ahead.

Some of us will have gone through such torrid times that you have not spoken to one of your close family members for years. It happens far more often than you might think.

These are profound and painful issues.

If God has begun to heal those memories already, where forgiveness and reconciliation has begun I pray against the Devil's tendency to make us doubt the reality of God's forgiveness.

But today, you may know that it is you who need to apologise, to ask forgiveness for your part in some family feud.

Some will realise that you do have something to do to open up a dialogue that *you* have closed –

Sometimes we have not been able to forgive - maybe today God is wanting you to try to take that first step of forgiving, even deciding to try to forgive.

Sometimes, we really have done our honest best to make peace, to make up with someone in our family, but they simply will not have it.

It may help you to remember St Paul's words in Romans ch 12,

<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.**

St Paul recognises that sometimes we can do no more but have to pray for our estranged relative and ask God his peace for yourself.

So as we ask God by His Spirit to minister to us now, I offer you three key things:

1 **God can do anything, anything at all – with your relationships.** Even though Jacob and Esau had fallen out so badly as they had – despite death threats, being cheated, not talking for 14 years - when they do finally meet up again (in Gen 33) Esau has the grace to put it all behind him and greet his deceitful brother with open arms, so that when Jacob sees him he acknowledges he sees 'the face of God'. God is merciful and gracious to us too, and we can be like him...

2 **God can do anything, anything at all – with you.** God didn't give up on Jacob even though he was so flawed. He continued to use him, speak to him, guide him, bring good about through him.

3 **Finally, God hasn't done just anything, he has done something remarkable** - in Jesus.

For Jacob, it is sad to see that his own deceit has lasting effects upon his own life and that of his children.

When we become a Christian, we step into a new family history. Jesus came to set us free from the past and free for the future. While we still have a responsibility to love and care for our human family, they no longer need dictate our future.

Let's not be like Esau who did not value his birth right, let's celebrate our place as beloved sons and daughters of God. Let's delight in our new family. We belong to God the Father who lavishes his love upon each of – equally! We have Jesus as our brother – who does not vie with us for the Father's attention. We do not need to work to earn a place of favour in the Father's heart either. We're all his favourites and he has plenty of love and time for each of us.

*Let's come now before the wounded healer, Jesus – ask for honest hearts to bring to him those things we need to.*

*Seek help by asking someone else to pray with you.*

*You might like to pick up a small heart – as a way of thanking God for all the good in your own family relationships...or maybe a small cross, as a reminder of the reconciling work that Jesus did for us there – and that we too might need to take a step this week to do something to bring about some reconciliation.*