**Sermon for 2 August 2020**

**Jacob – the con man comes home**

*Please read Genesis 32.22-31.*

The story of Jacob is one of the great stories of the Hebrew Bible. It’s a story Jesus would have known well from hearing it read from a scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth. In today’s episode, Jacob the con man finally comes home. We’ll come to today’s reading eventually, but first I want us to step back and see the whole arc of the story, from home to Haran and back again – a journey of over a thousand miles and many incidents.

Over the last four weeks we’ve heard how Jacob fled from his parental home in Beersheba, because his elder brother Esau was out to kill him for tricking him out of his birthright and his Father’s blessing (Genesis 25). On the journey Jacob had a dream in which God promised to be with him, to watch over him and to bring him back to the land of Canaan (Genesis 28.10-22).

Jacob travelled 500 miles north to take refuge with his Uncle Laban in Haran. There he met and fell in love with his cousin, Rachel, but his Uncle Laban, who was also a con man, tricked Jacob into marrying both his daughters and made him work for 14 years for this privilege (Genesis 29).

The tension between Laban and Jacob and also the two wives must have made this an uncomfortable household. Jacob wanted to leave, but Laban was reluctant to let him go, because he knew Jacob had brought God’s abundant blessing to the family business of rearing sheep and goats. So Laban keeps Jacob working for another six years, while Jacob makes a shrewd deal with Laban to keep all the speckled and spotted sheep for himself. Cunning as ever, Jacob manages to become very prosperous, with large flocks, many servants, camels and donkeys. Of course, this makes the family tensions even worse, and, at long last, God intervenes, telling Jacob it’s time to go home (Genesis 30-31).

It’s 20 years since he fled from home. Jacob now has to escape again, this time with his wives and all his servants, sheep, goats, camels and donkeys in tow. Laban pursues him, but God is protecting Jacob and warns Laban not to condone or condemn Jacob. They make an agreement before God to go their separate ways, and Jacob and all his retinue continue on their long journey south.

That’s one big problem solved, by God stepping in to sort out Laban; but in his mind Jacob is now wrestling with another big problem that’s on the horizon which he’s travelling towards – it’s his elder brother, Esau. 20 years on, will Esau still be bent on killing him?

Jacob sends messengers ahead to try to prepare and soften up Esau for their meeting. The messengers come back saying, ‘Esau’s now coming to meet you – with 400 men!’ (Genesis 32.3-6) What can Jacob do? He stands to lose everything.

Typically, he improvises a cunning plan (32.7-8), dividing his family, servants and herds into two groups, thinking that if one of the groups is attacked, the other might be able to escape. Then (this is a surprise!) Jacob prays to God to save him from Esau (32.9-12). Jacob the con man genuinely, humbly, turns to God for help in this life-threatening situation. His trust in God has certainly grown through his troubles, and his experience of God’s protection and blessing over the years. God has been at work in Jacob’s life. He has changed, but he’s far from perfect. He’s still scheming desperately, sending ahead, at intervals, herds of goats, cows and donkeys as presents to attempt to placate his brother before they come face to face (32.13-21).

Now we come to today’s reading (32.22-32). As night falls, Jacob sees his wives and children safely across the river, and then only Jacob is left all alone. He’s wrestling mentally with his hopes and fears for his life, family and fortune. He also finds himself wrestling physically all night with a mysterious stranger. What’s this all about? It’s a picture of Jacob’s relationship with God. Jacob, whose name literally means ‘Heel-grabber’, is still determined to grab whatever he can. He knows he’s wrestling with God, and he’s not going to let go until the mystery man blesses him, even when his hip is wrenched out of joint. At daybreak God does bless him, and also gives him a new name, ‘Israel’, meaning ‘he struggles with God’. Jacob calls the place ‘Peniel’, meaning ‘the face of God’, because, Jacob says, ‘I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared’ (v.30).

This mysterious incident demonstrates that Heel-grabber doesn’t need to wrestle a blessing out of God; the Lord has already chosen to bless him and work through Israel’s descendants to progress his plan to bless the world. We, of course, see this coming to fruition through Jesus, a descendent from the line of Judah, one of Jacob’s sons.

I said at the beginning that Jesus would have known this story well. This isn’t just speculation; let me prove it to you. We need to look at what happens in the next chapter, when Jacob, still limping, meets Esau the next morning:

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. 2He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. 3He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

Jacob’s very cautious, unsure what kind of reception he’ll get.

4But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

Esau says to Jacob, I don’t need all these flocks and herds; ‘I’ve got plenty of my own. You keep them.’

Please!’ says Jacob. ‘If I’ve found favour in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably.’ Jacob’s words here echo what he said after the wrestling match (back in Genesis 32.32) about seeing God face to face. Seeing Esau’s face is like seeing God, because Esau, like God, has also spared Jacob’s life.

Does this remind you of a story that Jesus told about a younger son who left his father and elder brother and went to a distant country? In Jesus’ story of the two sons, it’s the Father that runs to meet and embrace his returning son. The elder son, of course, refuses to have anything to do with him, whereas Esau, who is Jacob’s elder brother, runs to welcome Jacob home, like the father in Jesus’ story.

Esau has changed. 20 years ago he was furious, determined to kill Jacob because of his thievish tricks. But now, when Jacob looks into his brother’s face and sees his tears of welcome, he says it’s like seeing the face of God, the God who pours out undeserved grace, forgiveness and blessing on a con man called Jacob and works out his eternal plans through him.

Jesus is deliberately improvising on the Jacob and Esau story in his story of the two sons, making the point that the elder brother in his version is completely ungracious and unforgiving. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were like this. They were criticising Jesus for ‘welcoming sinners.’ They aren’t showing God’s welcoming face of grace and forgiveness to sinners, like Esau, like Jesus. I wonder, do we show the face of our gracious, loving God to the people we meet?

Finally, here’s one overarching point to take away from this long story of Jacob’s journey of faith that will help us on our journey through life:

**God is 100% committed to the Jacob Project**
God blesses Jacob, and always keeps his promises. He rescues him from troubles and protects him. He answers his prayers and makes his faith grow, brings him home and reconciles him to his brother. The Lord works out his plans through Jacob despite all his faults. It’s all down to God’s underserved grace and limitless love.

God in Christ is 100% committed to the Jacob Project, and the Paul Project, the Lucy Project, the Karen Project, the Tony Project, the ……………Project (fill in the blank with your own name!). It’s all about God’s grace – we don’t have to wrestle a blessing out of him. But we can open up our lives to him more, so his Holy Spirit can make us more like Jesus. We can give all we are to him, hand over our skills, talents and resources, and our faults and weaknesses.

We’re all works in progress, like Jacob, but, as St Paul says, we can be confident that God, ‘who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 1.6).

*Paul Moore*

**Talk for 9 August 2020**

**Jacob – the strength of forgiving**

*Please read Genesis 33.1-16.*

So we’ve reached the very end of our dip into the story of Jacob and Esau. Over the past five weeks we have seen a whole raft of human emotions and characteristics: envy, greed, love, treachery, care, fear and awe. We’ve been observers of a range of human frailty and interaction, and we’ve seen how God works through all this mess – how Jacob discovered his faith in God, and through struggling with faith, his destiny as a patriarch of Israel. We’ve thought about how this sits within the rolling out of God’s plan for the world – how God makes good even with the human material he has and the poor choices we make.

Indeed, I think of today’s story as an epilogue to this, or maybe it’s like one of those blockbuster movies, where all the heroes are seen sitting down sharing coffee and discussing what might happen next – and then we get a taster – a preview – of what the next episode will be.

Jacob meets Esau, the person he has deeply wronged. A little background to this: Jacob is finally travelling home. He has (with a little bit more trickery) built up a big flock of sheep and goats and he has his big family too: Rachel, Leah, their handmaids and all their 11 children. One of his 12 sons is yet to be born. With the encouragement of his wives and a negotiated agreement with Laban his father-in-law, Jacob sets off on his journey back to the land of Canaan. But he must travel through Edom to get there and Edom is where his older brother Esau has settled. Esau has also thrived, accumulating a family and flocks of animals but also an army of fighters. Jacob must get his family safely through this. It must have been both frightening and a time of reckoning for Jacob.

How does Jacob tackle this? He arranges his family, wives and children, perhaps as a sign that he, Jacob, is changed; that he has become a responsible father. These children are, too, Esau’s nephews and nieces, and family is important. He also sets aside a large proportion of his flocks as a gift, possibly we could think of this as a penance, to try and put things right. We must remember that God has been working on Jacob; he would have started understanding the difference between what’s right and wrong.

Esau’s response to this is wonderful. He doesn’t set his army on Jacob; he runs towards him, hugs and kisses him. This is Esau’s twin brother and he is loved, despite all the upsets he has caused. He is forgiven. Both twins cry; tears of joy and relief. Esau is unexpectedly forgiving.

How powerful this is, how strong; this generous, active forgiving. It is also, I think, a preview of what Jesus taught and what Jesus means. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus encourages us to forgive others. His parable about the Prodigal Son shows how God forgives us – even when we make a mess of things and throw away everything good that God gives us. Esau takes the step to forgive and suddenly the mess of broken relationships is healed. Esau, like the father in the parable, isn’t interested in extracting justice or repayment, he’s about taking action to forgive.

I once heard a wise vicar preach a sermon about forgiveness. He explained that if we don’t forgive, the person most likely to get hurt is: ***US***. We hold that hurt so it creeps in and sours us. Even worse if we pass that hurt down through the next generation and the next. Think of history and nations where that has happened – Ireland and its conflicts spring to mind. If we let go and forgive others, it sets things right – for the person who is forgiven, for the person forgiving and for the future.

It is difficult to be forgiving; little acts and big words often get in the way. Our pride or our hurt become barriers. As so often, the answer is Jesus. He did not wrong others; didn’t hurt or cheat them. Yet he was there living among people who did hurt, cheat and mistreat. He was, he is, God’s action in forgiving – in forgiving us first of all, as every act we do that hurts others, hurts God. And then as a model of what active forgiving should be: taking the initiative, even when we are blameless.

Can we, too, be actively forgiving? It’s such a strong thing to do. It sets such a strong foundation for the future.

*Margaret Ward*