

Family Affairs Pentecost 10 – 10th July 2011

Readings:

Genesis 25: 19-34

Gracious God, even though we call you Father, we are slow to call our fellow human beings sisters or brothers. Forgive us for the ways in which we betray your love for creatures by our jealousy, our pride and our greed. Teach us to love one another as you have loved us. Give us a sense of security whereby we will not feel the need to put others down, to compete, to measure ourselves by others' achievements. Gracious God, we call you Father, now teach us to live with one another as members of your holy, cherished human family, as true sisters and brothers. AMEN.

Thomas Fuller, the great 17th Century preacher, whose family included ministers and bishops, once said the following, "He that has no fools, knaves or beggars in his family, must have been begotten by a flash of lightening!" And I was wondering – Is there anyone here this morning who was begotten by a flash of lightening?

No! I think not! We all come from fairly typical families. Families that know happy times, and families that know sadness, sadness often brought about by what family members do to one another.

Families can be the greatest of God's gifts to humankind, but they can also be the gift that can cause the most pain.

So this morning, I want to talk about one such family. A family singled out by God to achieve great things. Indeed a family chosen by God to perform the greatest service of all for the whole of humankind. You see, I want to talk about Jesus' family, or at least Jesus' ancestors. I want us to spend some time with the family of Isaac and Rebekah and their two boys, Esau the elder, and his younger twin brother, Jacob. And by any stretch of the imagination, this is some family!

Hand up all the oldest children here today, those who were born first..... Psychologists tell us that we are the responsible ones. The ones who seldom rebel – that feel responsible for the well-being of the family. They tell us that the oldest children are over-represented in the helping professions, social workers, doctors, nurses and ministers, such is our need to help people. Well today's story from the Old Testament is not for us oldest children. The oldest child does not fare too well in the story of Esau and Jacob.

And hand up all the youngest children here this morning..... Well psychologists tell us that you are often indulged a wee bit too much. Life's supposed to be a lot easier for you. They claim that your parents are done with experimenting by the time they come to you and have learned from their earlier mistakes. Parents are less anxious about letting you do things at an earlier age. But this is often a source of conflict with the older brothers and sisters who

have been heard more than once saying to mum and dad, "But I wasn't allowed to do that at their age. I wasn't allowed to go to the pictures on my own at 14." Sounds familiar? Am I making this up? No.

And hand up all the middle children. Well this story is not about you at all. But you can still listen in and maybe learn something. And finally hand up all the only children. It's not about you either. I just didn't want you to feel left out.

No, this is a story about brothers who don't get on. It's about sibling rivalry. About parents who have favourites. It's about lying and cheating. It's about family fights. It's about Jesus' family. And it's about any of our families. Unless you were begotten by a flash of lightning! It's about life!

And it all starts with a gift from God. But you know, a gift from God often has a painful aspect to it. Look at love – there is always pain as well as great joy in our love to those close to us. Pain from loss of someone close, pain from betrayal of someone trusted and loved. Yet love is a gift from God. So it is with family.

But before I retell the story, do any of you believe that the story of Esau and Jacob is literally true? I believe that it is true because it is a truthful way of explaining, because it tells of the human condition. No midwife was there to record the story of the birth and newborn infants don't have ambition. But like all birth narratives they are constructed to explain later events, and this story is no different.

The story goes this way: God gives Rebekah and Isaac the gift of two sons, and each is to bring great joy to their mother and father. But even in the womb there's trouble. And Rebekah prays to God and is told that there is further trouble ahead. (It's a bit like the later story of Mary who is also told of the trouble ahead for her son Jesus.) The younger son will lord it over the older, and they come out of the womb fighting, the older, first, with the younger brother holding onto his brother's heel. It's as if Jacob so wants to be born first that he tries to hold his older brother back. And the older, who is all red and hairy, not a pretty sight, well he is called Red or Esau; and the younger who has grasped his brother's heel is called "Heel" or Jacob.

And perhaps Heel is an appropriate enough name for him, given what we learn about him later in this story cycle.

And the two boys are like chalk and cheese. Esau is what every sporting father would want - a born champion, outdoors type, climbing trees before he could walk, hunting, running, jumping. Could play for Israel! A real "jock!"

But Jacob, he couldn't be more different. What every loving mother wants in a son. He's sensitive, a home body, studious, good with his hands, and loves to cook, all in all a lovely sensitive new age guy!

And so true to the family stereotype, we are told Dad's favourite is Esau and Mum's

favourite is Jacob. A formula for family disaster. But nowadays we know better than to play favourites, don't we?! But I wonder how familiar this story is even today!

So I wonder if these old Bible stories are not universal tales depicting the human condition. They tell it how it is - real life drama that could be repeated in every family no matter the age.

And perhaps there is an underlying truth in this story - God's grace can work through such imperfect vessels, frail, imperfect families.

And God chooses to do extraordinary things in this problem family. In a society where the eldest is king, the oldest gets the lion share, God chooses the youngest to fulfil God's promise to humanity. And we should not be surprised. Here again is evidence of God's willingness to turn conventional wisdom on its head. "The first shall be last and last shall be first," to quote Jesus.

But it's not a pretty sight to see - Jacob the con man. I don't think I like the man (but perhaps because I'm an oldest child). Jacob the cheat, Jacob the opportunist. Sells his stew for his brother's birthright. So much for families sticking together. And Esau is naive enough to let it happen. A tailor-made situation for a family feud. They've started on less than that. When you've been treated like that, how can you forgive? Esau will eventually be left with the leftovers. How many of our families have been torn apart by similar acts of deceit or even just simple misunderstandings - especially when we are talking inheritance.

But like so many universal stories told in Scripture, we discover the propensity for bringing good out of evil. God is able to bring forgiveness, to bring reconciliation. Indeed such is the hurt that some of us experience at the hands out families, that it is God alone that brings about forgiveness, brings about reconciliation. But that's next week's story.

But for this week it is enough to know that God is with us in our somewhat chaotic families. God understands and can even use families such as ours.

Scripture is full of stories of transformation, stories of reconciliation, and the Jacob/Esau story - as we will learn in next week's reading - points to what can be achieved in all our families through the power of God.

For some the hurt from family runs so deep that it humanly impossible to forgive and we allow the hurt, the betrayal, the anger, to eat away at ourselves. God comes to both Jacob and Esau and transforms them. God can come to us and do the same in our families. All it takes from us is a surrender to the healing love of God. That's my prayer for my family and that's my prayer for yours. That we learn the table of forgiveness that we we're about to sing about.

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