

## NAURC worship 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020

### Sermon: Genesis 28: 10-22

#### Part one

- > The Bible is a great story book, full of heroes and heroines, good kings, bad kings priests, prophets, shepherds and many more.
- > Today, we are looking at a story with one of the patriarchs of our faith as the central character – Jacob.
- > His is a tale of rivalry between brothers, deceit and death threats as well as the famous ladder.
- > I'll begin with the back-story which takes us back a couple of generations to Abraham and Sarah who Pauline spoke about a few weeks ago. As you will probably recall, Abraham had two sons – with different women! It really is like a soap opera plot don't you think?
- > Anyway, their second son was Isaac who married Rebekah, who in turn had twin sons.
- > The Bible story tells us that the two boys didn't get on with each other. It was there from the very start as we are told that they wriggled around a lot even when Rebekah was pregnant. When the time came for her to give birth Esau arrived first, closely followed Jacob who was holding onto Esau's heel.
- > Although they were twins, they definitely weren't identical, and grew into very different people. This was not helped by their parents because Isaac favoured Esau and Rebekah favoured Jacob.
- > The next Bible scene involves Jacob persuading Esau to give up his birthright in exchange for a good helping of Jacob's lentil stew – it must have been really tasty!
- > Time moves on, and we are into Isaac's old age and he has failing eyesight. Ambitious Jacob hatches a plan that exploits inability to see, in order to gain the blessing from his father that, by rights should be reserved for Esau. The devious plot is told in Genesis chapter 27 if you want to tune into that episode.
- > Anyway, Isaac gets tricked into giving Jacob get his blessing. Esau finds out and is furious. It's just like something out of East Enders!
- > As the Bible tells us; "Esau seethed in anger against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him; he brooded, "The time for mourning my father's death is close. And then I'll kill my brother Jacob." Gen 27: 41 *The Message*
- > Rebekah gets wind of this and warns Jacob to make a sharp exit from Beersheba. She tells him to head north to Haran to find safety with her brother Laban.
- > The excerpt from chapter 28 we are about to hear is the next episode and opens with Jacob travelling north through the hill country to the west of the Dead Sea.

**Reading:** Genesis 28: 10-22 New International Version

## Part two

> To be honest, I'm not so sure I like Jacob's character in the early part of the story. He is out to get what he wants and seems quite content to use subterfuge to achieve his aims. Not really what you might expect from someone held in such high regard in the history of our faith is it?

> There is also another little hint in the Bible story that Jacob didn't even share the faith of his parents.

> As he is in the process of fooling his blind father into giving him the blessing that was, by rights, Esau's – Jacob speaks to his father of "your God" (Genesis 27: 20).

> In the Bible reading we have just heard Jacob is on the run. He is near the city of Luz – it's getting dark, so he camps out for the night. It's then that Jacob has an amazing vision and encounter with God.

> We can't be precise about what he saw as translations vary between a ladder, a staircase and a ramp – I'm quite taken with the idea of heaven having an access ramp – or is that a bit flippant?

> Whatever the detail, Jacob's encounter with God had a profound effect on him – hardly surprising really!

> We are told that when he woke up, he was both afraid and in awe. And from that moment on he was a changed person.

> No more "your God" – now Jacobs says "the Lord will be *my* God" (v 21)

> His selfish ambitions change too as he pledges to return to God a tenth of all he receives.

> This is a complete turn-around for Jacob on that journey – in some ways reminiscent of the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus?

> There is much more of Jacob's story with several more episodes to catch up on if you'd like to read them one day. But here comes a plot-spoiler warning ..... the tale ends with a tense scene where Esau and Jacob come face to face but are reconciled through forgiveness; "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept." (33:4)

> "The end"

> But I wish to offer a few thoughts to take away from this tale:

> The first is: God knows our possibilities – God has hopes and plans for us. God can and does work with us in spite of our flaws and failures – they are no barrier to God. It's how we move forward that matters, just as Jacob's story shows us.

> Secondly: Jacob was on the road, between places, when he had his vision of heaven opened before him. His encounter with God was when he was out and about

– he hadn't visited some easily identifiable 'holy place' like a temple when he saw the stairway to heaven and knew he was in God's presence.

> It was only afterwards that he marked the spot with a stone and named it "Bethel" which means 'the house of God'.

> I think this has meaning for us in these strange times when we worship apart from each other. You see, the place to meet God can be – as we have seen from this story in the most unexpected of places – God's House can even be on a roadside.

> Yes, gathering in a place set aside for worship may well help us – but God can, quite clearly, meet us anywhere.

> If we believe God created and sustains the whole world, then why should God only choose certain buildings that people put up and decorate?

> I'm recording this in the Ipswich Road building – and you are joining me wherever you are, probably at home. Wherever you are and I am, matters little – God can and will reach out to us irrespective of location.

> There is an idea in Celtic Christianity of "thin places" – you may recall me talking about the idea before – places where you feel that the veil between God's presence and our's is especially thin – a sort of touching place.

> Have you ever had that experience?

> I have had several – and the majority have not been church buildings.

> My last thought is that God chooses all sorts of people to be extraordinary – and that is a part of that great gift of God – diversity. You don't have to be a particular type of holy person – just open to a relationship with your creator, even if you have doubts.

> God - because God *is God* - can and will work wonders as we all journey on and see our lives transformed just as happened to Jacob.

Amen