

12th July 2020, Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Gen. 25. 19-34, Psalm 119. 105-112, Rom. 8.1-11, Mat 13.1-9, 18-23

We live in extra-ordinary times – how's that for starting off with a cliché after 4 months of Covid-related restrictions. However... in our Anglican church year we are very much in *Ordinary* Time, the months between Trinity Sunday (the Sunday after Pentecost) and the first Sunday of Advent. With a few exceptions, there are no special festivals, and so many preachers take the opportunity to do a sermon series on a special theme or book from the Bible. As ministry team we have decided to focus on the OT readings, which will cover Genesis and Exodus. As people sometimes struggle with the OT, I thought it might be a good idea to give some introduction – a reading tool, if you like. It is not the only one, but one that I have found to be quite helpful. It may offer some background to the stories that we will enter, of which today's story of the troublesome twins is one.

So here we go!

A few months ago I did a short placement in Her Majesty's Prison The Mount in Bovingdon, near London. The inmates there all have to take part in a Victim Awareness Course. During the sessions they have to take a long and hard look at themselves. What have they done, and why? How have they ended up in such a mess, that it even brought them to this place? What impact did their crime have on the victims and their families? On the wider community? On their own families, their jobs, their expectations? I attended one of these sessions, and I was struck by the brutal honesty of some of the participants, and the courage with which they faced their life. And there I was, with my sheltered, neatly organized Christian life. Such a difference, and still I felt perfectly at home. I knew why. In my own journey towards ministry I'd had to apply the same brutal honesty to face the demons from my own past. I knew that this was the only way to transformation, for me as much as it was for Gary, for John, for Steve and for Ahmed. We will never find new life, if we do not deal with the old.

Now what has all this to do with the Old Testament? The inmates each had been given a special workbook, in which they had to write down answers and reflections. In a sense, a large chunk of the OT like the workbook of an Awareness Course in prison. Let me explain. The OT received its final form during the exile in Babylon. For the people of Israel the exile was like a life sentence in prison. Their nation had ceased to exist. The temple had been

destroyed, and the people had been driven from their land. How had they ended up in such a mess, that it even brought them to this place? What did it tell them about themselves and about God? God's presence had always been connected to the land, and to the temple. So where was he now? Was there still hope? Hard questions to grapple with, and no easy answers, but they gave themselves to the task. They gathered written material and shared stories that might shed a light on the problem. They added their own thoughts and reflections. They told some of the stories in different ways to look at the issue from all sides.

This is why I compared the Old Testament to the workbook of an Awareness Course. It was written, compiled and edited by a people who had lost everything, and who were therefore forced to take a long and hard look at themselves. They did so with brutal honesty, facing up to the whole history that had brought them here, in exile, in Babylon, far away from God. It is not the shining heroic tale that other nations of the time used to tell about their histories. No – they wash their dirty linen in public. They share their sordid secrets with all and sundry. Look at the history of the kings: a collection of mostly shameful and scandalous stories. Tabloid reporters would have had the time of their life in ancient Israel, no doubt about it. The history of the Judges: what a disgusting mess – rape and bloodshed everywhere. The history of the journey through the desert: not brilliant either – rebellion and idol worship. The history of the patriarchs: not a family history to be proud of – rivalry, lies, prostitution, theft. Who is the founding father of their people? The man after whom they are named Israel? He started off as Jacob. A liar, a cheat, a cunning, scheming, greedy man.

Which brings us, briefly, to the story itself. What happens, is quite simple. The birthright in ancient families concerned the material possessions of the parents, divided into the number of sons plus one. The eldest then received a double share. What Esau is selling to Jacob is this additional share of his inheritance – and given his nature and lifestyle, we can even understand it: he was a man of the field. Material possessions would just be a nuisance. A single share would be more than enough to keep him going. Let Jacob have the lion share of the sheep and the servants and all the worries that go with it, if it makes him happy.

It is Jacob who is the unsympathetic character here, painted as the silent guy with the ordinary daily life, who suddenly takes advantage of one of your weak moments, stabbing you in the back. Look what happened to him as a result of his scheming and cheating: in the

end he had to flee the country and *go into exile*. Hey – that sounds familiar! But hey again – it was not the end of the story!

God brought him back. Who knows - there may still be hope for the people in exile, too. Because looking back: where was Jacob's family born? In exile in Haran! Where was the people of Israel born? In exile in Egypt! A pattern emerges. A pattern that brings hope.

And so the brutal honesty with which the story is told brings to light something else as well: the ongoing faithfulness of a God who tends to work with the most unlikely and unlikeable characters. The blackness and bleakness make the light of God stand out. When everything seems to have come to an end, time and again there emerges a pattern of new beginnings.

Ploughing backwards through their shameful history the people ploughed their hearts and minds, preparing fresh and fertile soil for the seed of hope. This is exactly what Jesus encourages us to do in the parable of the sower: dig up and remove the rocks and the weeds of your life, to prepare fertile soil where something new can grow. Not only individually, facing the shame and the hurt of your own history. Also as a church, as the people of God – after 2000 years of church history, there is a lot to be ashamed off; but I am especially thinking now of the many horrible stories of sexual abuse that have come to light over the past decade, after dozens and dozens of years of being covered-up.

Like Israel in exile and like the inmates of The Mount we need to face the truth of our past with brutal honesty. We need to bring it into the light of God. Because it is only the Spirit of truth who can set us free. Only then we will see clearly how God in his faithfulness has never abandoned us. Only that is the way to new life. Amen.