

“Families!”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Uniting Church, 24 July 2011

Genesis 29:15-30 Romans 8:28-39 Matthew 13:44-53

The Bible is often held out as presenting the best model of family life and the best model of what marriage is meant to be, as God wants it – and so it does. But not on every page, not in every book. Today’s Old Testament picture of marriage and family is hardly something to be praised. Add in the practices of the later kings of Israel like David or Solomon, with their multiple wives and their scores of concubines, and we have to acknowledge that the Bible does not always present to us a picture of faithful lifelong husbands and wives with their happy, loyal and loving children.

The relationships which characterise the family of Isaac, his wife Rebekah, their twin sons Esau and Jacob, Rebekah’s brother Laban and his daughters Leah and Rachel are relationships built more than anything else on jealousy, competition, deception and outright lies. Not a model family at all. And hardly models of marriage either – Esau has at least three wives and Jacob ends up unwittingly with two wives and then fathers his 12 sons and various daughters with four different women, his two wives and their two servant maids. Yet these sons become the forebears of the 12 tribes of Israel, and it’s Jacob whose name is changed to Israel, by God himself.

Mind you, in today’s reading from Genesis there is no mention of God at all. It’s a very strange story. Jacob loves the beautiful younger daughter Rachel, and makes a bargain with her father Laban to work for 7 years in exchange for his daughter’s hand. Seven years passes, the big day arrives, but that night Laban manages to sneak his older daughter Leah into the darkness of the wedding tent. I always love the verse which pronounces “When morning came, it was Leah!” – she who is not as beautiful as Rachel and who, according to a Hebrew word difficult to translate, probably has poor eyesight. One wonders too about Jacob’s eyesight! Then he has to work another 7 years in order to earn his second wife, Rachel, the one he’d always preferred.

Of course this is a case of the deceiver deceived. Remember the earlier story of how Jacob, the younger twin, was born holding on to the heel of Esau, the older twin – and of how as a young man Jacob stole Esau’s rights as the oldest son by conniving with his mother to pretend to be Esau, putting the skin of a young goat on his arms and neck, “for Esau was a hairy man”, and thus fooling his father Isaac and overtaking, supplanting Esau as the son with the rights of the firstborn. This family is full of rather sordid stories!

Yet, take note of how it is this dysfunctional family which God still loves and employs for his purposes. God works through this family to establish the people of Israel, these are the people to whom God chooses to reveal himself, in whom God arouses faith, and through whom God works for the good of the whole of humanity. They’re a deceitful dishonest and dishonourable bunch, yet God works in and through them, God never gives up on them, and through them and their descendants God works marvellous things. You don’t have to be a perfect family, you don’t have to have the perfect marriage, you don’t have to produce perfect children - God loves you nevertheless, God will work in you nevertheless.

A few years ago after I’d conducted a funeral service out at the Crematorium, in which we’d read that beautiful passage from Romans about how nothing can separate us from the love of God, a burly rather scary-looking guy with heavily tattooed arms came up to me and said quietly and a bit wistfully “God wouldn’t love a guy like me, would he”. “You betcha” I said,

my mind springing to tough characters like Esau and Jacob. He looked at me and after a moment said “Naah, that couldn’t be right”, to which I responded that God’s love is there for everyone, seeking us out, wanting us to receive. He went off to his motorbike not particularly convinced, but obviously thinking about it.

God’s family comprises all sorts of people. God wants us to know he loves us, regardless of what we are like, regardless of what sort of family we’re part of or how well or how poorly we relate to other people, regardless of what we’ve done or not done. That’s why we call God’s love unconditional. Of course God not only wants us to receive his love, not only wants us to say yes to being part of God’s family, he also wants us then to live as people of love for others, as people who refuse to be deceitful or dishonest or dishonourable. Receiving God’s love is an enormous source of security, joy and peace for us – living according to God’s way of love is an enormous source of purpose and fulfilment alongside the security, joy and peace of knowing God’s love.

That’s why Jesus in his parables says God’s kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field or like a pearl of immense value. Notice that in both those images of finding God’s love, there’s a sense of stumbling upon it. God often breaks in on us when we’re not particularly looking for him – we might be going about our everyday business when something happens or someone says something or a thought comes into our mind from apparently nowhere, and we stop and think, “hey is that you God”, and normally our next thought is “thank you”, “bless you”.

Families! Often dysfunctional, sometimes downright dangerous. But God still loves us and will still work in and through us. And the family of God, diverse as it is and here on earth as the church frequently dysfunctional and occasionally dangerous, is still the family we want to belong to. For God is seeking us out, everyone, with his gift of love, and calls us to receive his love and to live as a member of the best family of all, God’s family.

To the glory of God. Amen.