

Sunday 22 February 2015
10.00 am Morning Worship
Lent 1

Genesis 29 vs 1-30

Then Jacob went on his journey. He went on his journey for three reasons. **The first** was because God needed to keep Jacob safe from the family conflict that had arisen. Jacob went on his journey because his brother was breathing murderous threats to him about deceiving their father Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing when in theory it should have gone to Esau as the elder of the two. Jacob had to escape for his life! In many respects, this was nothing new because a constant aspect of Jacob's life was conflict. He was in conflict with his brother in the womb; he was in conflict with his brother as he was born and this set the pattern between the two brothers and their parents throughout Jacob's life. His journey now was as a direct result of family conflict. Jacob was on a journey, so he thought, as a person trying to escape conflict whilst in fact Jacob was on a journey because God was keeping him safe.

And whilst Jacob may have thought he was escaping conflict in his immediate family, what he would find is conflict in his family of marriage. Jacob would find his match in his uncle Laban. There would be conflict between Laban and Jacob which would act as a form of very necessary discipline in Jacob's life. Thus Jacob would continue to experience conflict with Laban for the next twenty years. These years would act as a wilderness time for Jacob during which time God kept him safe and worked away on Jacob's character.

The second reason Jacob went on his journey was to find a wife. No social media or speed dating in those days or social networks to help in identifying an appropriate spouse. Jacob was sent on his journey back to the land of his mother to find a wife from his mother's kinsfolk. But as I have already said, this produced further conflict in keeping with Jacob's character. The background to Jacob making his journey to find a wife was based on the conflict between Jacob and his brother. Esau had married women from other ethnic groups. It caused his parents no amount of aggro. This is still the case today in some instances. Marriage outside ones particular ethnic group can cause conflict and problems within families of a lasting nature. Rebekah had grown tired of all this aggravation and demanded that Jacob travel to her own family and find a wife from there. Unlike Abraham though, who sent a servant with a retinue of camels and many gifts to find a wife for his son Isaac, Jacob travels back to Padam Haran (from whence Abraham had come originally) with nothing other than the clothes he stood up in. Laban could not have thought much of this young upstart appearing on the scene wanting to marry one of his daughters and the youngest one at that!

In making his journey to find a wife, Jacob was duped into marriage with Rachel's older sister Leah first whom Jacob certainly did not love. Is there no irony in all this? Jacob had duped his older brother Esau out of his birthright and blessing and now he himself is duped into marriage with the older sister Leah before the younger one, Rachel whom he loved. It sounds like a case of poetic justice at work! Jacob had in fact fallen into a trap of the same kind that he had laid for his brother Esau. The boot was on the other foot now! But because Jacob loved Rachel so much and was determined to have her as his wife, he would scheme and plan a way to get his own back on Laban eventually. The point in this though is that Jacob needed to learn some discipline and God saw that this was probably the only way Jacob would actually learn this. Jacob was getting what he deserved – some of his own medicine. It was not a pleasant experience but very necessary in God's grand scheme of things, not least in keeping him safe.

So Jacob went on his journey because God needed to keep him safe and Jacob needed to find a wife. Now we come to **the third reason** for Jacob going on his journey. **The third reason** is that Jacob's journey was all part of God's plan, of the bigger picture that God had in mind to accomplish. So what is going on behind all the obvious events here that God wanted to accomplish? Originally, God said to Abraham to leave Padam Haran with his family and go to a place that God would reveal to him. God had led Abraham to Canaan and promised to give it to him and his descendents forever. Jacob is a descendent of Abraham so why is he journeying back to the place from whence God had led his ancestor Abraham? Why is Jacob now travelling back to the very place God said to Jacob's grandfather to leave? It appears to be a retrograde step.

Has God changed his mind? We have seen that the answers to this question are firstly to keep Jacob safe and secondly for him to get a wife.

As far as God was concerned, both of these answers would ensure there were further descendents to take forward God's plan of salvation. Only God knew how long it would take before Esau no longer breathed murderous threats towards his brother whom he wanted to kill and for it to be safe for Jacob to return to the land he had left. We have to acknowledge that God is quite good at keeping those he has chosen safe from others who would seek to destroy them and in providing ways to ensure that his plans are realised. Thus in a journey to escape to safety, God often provides a period of time to reflect on what has happened so far, to experience God's discipline followed by a re-commissioning to realise the full extent of God's plan. Jacob was on such a journey to safety and a wilderness time where God would keep him safe and provide the means of wives and children by which God's plan, despite all of Jacob's continued conflict, scheming and deceit, would be furthered. Have you got that? The journey Jacob was undertaking was all part of God's bigger picture and plan of salvation.

The Bible is full of interludes in the lives of God's servants where it appears retrograde steps are taken and people disappear off to outlying places for long periods of time. Moses would be another case in point later on. God kept Moses safe when he ran away from Egypt having committed murder and spent years looking after his father-in-law's sheep in the desert before God saw that it was time for a re-commissioning. Winston Churchill had wilderness years from political position during the 1920s and 30s before being called into service again. And what a service it was for our country during the 1940s. Adrian Mole had wilderness years aged 23 and 3/4 when he suffered low self esteem, career failures and loneliness through failed affairs before things picked up for him again.

Time, of what appears to us to be wilderness time of perhaps nothing in particular happening, can be in fact be time of God's appointment in the development of our faith, character, and in discipline. Time when we try to escape from conflict only to find ourselves caught up in further conflict and not of our choosing, can make us query if we have heard God right in the first place. It can sometimes make us wonder if God has called us to serve him at all! As a result of this, we may want to throw in the towel and give up. What I would say to you today if you find yourself in this position is, don't be too alarmed. It may seem your journey of faith leads you into a wilderness and you may think God has abandoned you or not chosen you. These are legitimate thoughts. Instead, however, I would encourage you to reflect on what has happened so far, continue to seek the Lord for all you are worth and wait patiently for him because God will surely lead you forth again from the wilderness with greater faith, development of your character, and conviction of the fact that he has chosen you and of what he has called you to do.

For our story today however, we may also ask, why did God use such a scheming, deceitful character to achieve his bigger plan of salvation. God had chosen Abraham and his descendents to bring forth his amazing grace but not before the full extent of the deception people were under from the fall way back in the Garden of Eden was made known good and strong. For deception occurred in Abraham's life and also recurred in the lives of Isaac, Jacob and Esau. Lies, scheming and deceit were a family trait. It even extended as we see in today's verses to Laban, Jacob's uncle. Believe it or not though, God could use such a family trait to achieve what he had planned. Sometimes we simply have to acknowledge that there is no accounting for God's amazing grace in choosing the people he does to bring his plans and purposes to completion. The problem is that we so often judge people by what we see on the outside without knowing what God sees on the inside or of understanding the bigger plan that God has anyway. We scratch our heads in astonishment when we see God choosing and calling what seems to us the most unlikeliest of people to serve his purposes and in the process we can miss out on what God is doing.

So whilst we may not have chosen Jacob to fulfil God's purpose, God did! For Satan had deceived Adam and Eve in the garden, as a consequence of which God had to put in place his great plan of salvation. God chose Abraham, one person, one family one small clan to bring forth his amazing grace but not before the full extent of the deception people were under was made known good and strong. It was necessary therefore to use such a scheming, deceitful person to demonstrate the full extent of the deception people

were under and to make this known to them. God had entered into a covenant with Abraham. God had promised the land to Abraham and his descendants forever and God would bring this about even if it appeared that the people God was choosing and using were making retrograde steps and had character faults which in our opinion would disqualify them for such a task! Jacob's time in Padam Haran would indeed enable God to continue his plan with fulfilling the covenant and promise he had made to Abraham, as we shall see in succeeding weeks.

In conclusion, Jacob went on his journey; firstly so that God could keep him safe, secondly so that Jacob could find a wife and thirdly so that God could fulfil his plan and purpose in keeping the covenant and promise God had made to Abraham. To do this, God used what is to us the most unlikeliest person imaginable. One who was full of lies, schemes and deceit and who attracted conflict wherever he went. Ultimately, God would send a person who was entirely without sin, who would deal with the deception, lies and sin once and for all. God would send his one and only son, our Lord Jesus Christ to make his own journey to the cross and to die for us and to rise again that we might be forgiven and have new life in him. Jesus would have his own wilderness experience but emerge from it victorious. We too can emerge from a wilderness experience in the victory Christ has won for us with greater faith and more developed character that is conformed to the image of Christ if only we will bide our time in the wilderness seeking God.

For us today, to journey in the way of Christ is to continue along the pathways first walked by Abraham and his descendants (including Jacob). To make that journey in the power of the Spirit requires us as followers of Christ to "walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5 v.2). It requires us to walk with the eyes of faith, the way Christ walked in the land of the promise where the faithful "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6 v.4). Where are you on that journey today?

