

TALK FOR CAREY, 26.6.22, GENESIS 31:17-28, 48-50 & 2 COR. 5:14-20

STOCK-PILING SHEEP, PILING UP STONES

Jacob still hasn't learned his lesson has he?. Again he seeks to deceive family members. OK, it's true his relative Laban had tricked Jacob into marrying Leah ahead of Rachel, by disguising Leah. So, Laban gave Jacob a dose of his own medicine. And Jacob ends up working for Laban a lot longer than he had first bargained for. 20 years of looking after Laban's sheep for him.

But here again, Jacob still wants to gain the advantage over others close to him... Just as he did with his brother Esau before. Jacob makes sure that he gains more sheep than Laban. (Don't ask me to explain how!.. But this is how spotted sheep first got the name 'Jacob Sheep'...). And Jacob is accused here, by Laban, of deceit, by running away with his daughters, without telling him.

But what is also significant is this. It's Laban, not Jacob, who suggests how they might reconcile their differences. Laban pursues and catches Jacob and his family. Laban berates Jacob for his deceitful behaviour. That's despite the dream Laban has before their meeting. A dream where the LORD tells Laban not to 'say anything either good or bad to Jacob'. Was Laban then, disobedient to God's message to him? Actually I don't think so. I think Laban just tells Jacob the truth; tells him how he feels about his behaviour. But, because of his dream of God, Laban doesn't seek any revenge or advantage. He doesn't threaten Jacob with anything. Instead, he seeks to restore their relationship. He offers to make a covenant. He offers to make peace. To come to a new agreement together. A bit like the covenant we have entered into with Rosemary today, as she has come into membership here at Carey... Praise God!

To return to our story. It seems that Jacob has again got away with his deceitful behaviour... Really? No, not really. He can run but he can't hide. There is no escape for Jacob. Having left one family fall-out behind, it now seems his brother Esau is also pursuing him – that's in chapter 32.

But Esau is not actually pursuing Jacob. We know who is really pursuing Jacob don't we ? (x2) ? It is **God** who pursues Jacob. Throughout his slippery life. All his evasions. All his running away; his attempts to hide from the truth.

Ever had that sense... ? Of the hound of heaven pursuing you... ? I know I have. Still do. Even when we have surrendered ourselves to God, or think we have.

Even then God still pursues us and seeks us out. Through all our smokescreens and evasions. Through all the ways we deceive ourselves and others... God still is on our heels. God is still unavoidable. Right in front of us. In the day. At night. In our dreams. Still God comes to us. Graciously. Patiently. Persistently.

God seeks us out. As Laban did with Jacob. As Esau did, eventually, with Jacob. As the nameless, shrouded figure in Jacob's dream in chapter 32. 'What is your name?' Jacob asks the anonymous, shadowy figure. But he knows. And we know who it is who 'haunts' our dreams and every minute of every day.

Let me tell you a story from this week. It's about one of counsellors who Chris supervises. He's not a believer. (At least I don't think so, but it seems God is pursuing him!). He went to Israel recently. And, almost inevitably, ended up in Bethlehem. And he saw the worshippers in the Church of the Nativity. Amongst the darkness and coolness and candles of that church - he was surprised. Because he was profoundly moved. He got goose bumps. He found himself in tears. So, one of the first things he did on his return was that he asked to see Chris, because he knows she is a Christian. And he told her about this experience. And as he told her, he got goose bumps all over again. Was moved all over again. And Chris said, 'I believe you may have had an experience of God'... Hallelujah !

This guy's experience is very similar to Jacob's surprise at Bethel. He wakes up from his dream and says, 'God is in this place. God has always been here, with me. And I had not realised it.'

What is it which changes Jacob into Israel ? It's simply this. He meets God face to face. Only when he sees **God** for the first time, does he first see and recognise **other people** for who they are. Jacob says to Esau in chapter 32: 'Seeing you today has been like seeing the face of God'.

I saw the face of God recently. In the face of a homeless woman who came to Carey, on the night we had the Churches Together AGM. Her name was Laura. Suicidal. Wounded. Made in the image of God. Loved by God. I still feel like I could have done more to help.

From now on, we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. It's this thing about seeing people in a new way which is why I chose, as our 2nd reading today, this passage from 2 Corinthians 5 – again ! Like so much of Paul's

writings, this is stirring stuff. Also uncomfortable stuff. In Christ, we are a new creation, ***the old has gone***. God has given ***us*** the min. of reconciliation.

God is making an appeal to others through ***us*** ! Really ? Yes, really ! Paul drives home his point, with this amazing picture: We are Christ's ambassadors. Wow !

If we are honest with ourselves, we can all recognise something of Jacob in ourselves. We are all people who seek to gain an advantage over others. And what is even more shocking is that ***sometimes*** we use our faith to do this. We imagine that somehow, because of our faith, we have special access to God. Our faith is sometimes in danger of becoming a 'holy secret'. A 'special relationship' that we (and a few people like us) have with God. We belong to an extended 'Israel' and therefore we will receive special treatment from God.

But here's the uncomfortable truth. We have to leave ourselves behind. We have to leave our selfish Jacob self behind to truly become Israel. Just like Jacob, we all try to reach a compromise with the truth. We are looking for a comfortable arrangement, an accommodation with the truth. But, like Jacob, we keep running - in a forlorn attempt to find this nowhere place.

We can only be Christ's ambassadors if we don't keep evading God. We can only be used by God to share the good news of Jesus, if we daily humble ourselves before the cross of Christ. If we see the face of God in the face of Christ. And in the faces of those around us. Amen?

Let me finish with an encouraging story about someone who has been used by God to be an ambassador for Christ in our town. Someone told of a curious incident they witnessed in a chippie in Hemel just the other day. A group of men in their 20s or 30s came into the chippie. And one of these guys was singing a song at the top of his lungs. The song went: 'God loved the world so much, so much, that he gave his only Son, his Son, that whoever should believe in him will have eternal life, have life.' And the guy witnessing this was really surprised. He turned to the guy singing this song and the first question that came to him was this: 'Do you know Andrew Masters?'

As many of you will know, Andrew Masters leads a Christian mission to local schools, called Discovery. Over the last 20 years or so, he has been sharing his faith and singing this song to the children of Hemel Hempstead. And that guy, many years after leaving Primary School has not forgotten Andrew's song and Andrew's message. Praise God !

Isn't it amazing that the God of all creation, the God of all eternity, can use people like us, to share the good news of Jesus and to transform people's lives? Alleluia. And with this I finish: 'I plead with you, be reconciled to God'.