
It's All Part of God's Plan

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 30 July 2023

Genesis 29:15-28 • Romans 8:26-39 • Matthew 13:31-33,44-52



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

I sometimes feel when I'm reading Genesis that it's a bit of a soap opera. It's a great story, with real characters and situations, spiced up with the occasional miracle. God appears and speaks to humans, and these episodes are interspersed with homely domestic details. Reading a little bit each day, or each week as our lectionary has had us do, makes it seem like a TV series. What will Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Rachel get up to this week? Will Esau and Jacob ever make up? Will Sarah ever forgive Abraham for passing her off as his sister? Will Jacob ever love Leah the way she wants him to?

I'm being a little silly, but one has to approach these stories with a bit of a sense of humour. The people in Genesis are far from perfect. They make mistakes. They cheat and deceive each other. Yet God continues to bless them. For example, what are we to make of Jacob? He cheats his older brother Esau out of the rights which naturally belong to the eldest son, and his mother Rebekah helps him in this. Later,

he matches wits with his uncle Laban, who in today's story fools Jacob by giving him his daughter Leah to sleep with instead of the promised daughter Rachel. When Jacob discovers the deception in the morning and challenges Laban, Laban tells him he must "finish [her] bridal week" (that is, continue to sleep with her) and then he'll get the other daughter too. Now of course this was a time when men could have multiple wives, but to us it sounds rather immoral. Later, Jacob deceives Laban in order to get away with a considerable portion of his flock; and as they leave, Rachel steals Laban's household idols, concealing them under her seat (she can't get up because it's her time of the month) while he searches the room all around her. It's a scene from a rather earthy soap opera.

Yet we must realise that all of this satisfies God's plan. God uses these imperfect human beings, with all their faults, foibles and fabrications, to eventually bring Israel to the promised land. That's what all of this is heading towards. God looks far into the future and arranges events to suit his purposes. We do not always know what those purposes are, and if we examine individual steps along the way, such as Jacob deceiving Esau, we may not understand; but God's plans are perfect, and if we have faith in God, we believe that.

And if we believe that, then we must also believe that God is using us, right here and now, to further his plans. Why did Abraham have to go to Mamre? Why did Joseph have to go to Egypt? Why did I come to New Zealand, rather than stay in my native land? We have to accept that all things work according to God's plan. Whatever I am doing here, whatever all of you are doing here, is important and right, as long as we stay in tune with God. It may be only a small step towards the ultimate resolution of God's purpose, but nothing is wasted, nothing is unimportant. By God's grace, we are all part of a tremendous outworking of the Creator's plan.

Incredibly, even the bad things people do are used by God to further his purposes. What Jacob did to Esau, cheating him of his inheritance, was wrong. No matter how we look at it, it was still wrong. But God used it to help empower Jacob to go forward and play his part in the plan.

What we do know is that the end of all of this, everything Abraham and Jacob and the rest did, and everything we all have done and will do, will ultimately end in the great realisation of God's Kingdom. Jesus tries to tell us a little about that kingdom in today's Gospel, and as he often does, he speaks in parables.

The parables in today's Gospel reading bear a little thought. Many believe that the parable of the mustard seed, which starts small and then grows to be quite a large plant, and the one about the small amount of yeast in a big batch of dough, refer to the spreading of the Gospel. First one person knows, then he tells others, and so on. The kingdom will be here when all people come together in communion with Jesus Christ. But will they all come together? When we look at the parable about the fish caught in the net who will be sorted by the fishermen into piles of good and

bad, with the bad being thrown away, it seems clear that it refers to God's people, some of whom won't make it into the kingdom. Indeed, Jesus explains that parable himself, saying the the angels will throw the wicked in the furnace, where there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. So this is a parable with a warning, not just an image of the kingdom.

The parables of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price tell us that our relationship with God, and our inclusion in the kingdom when it arrives, are more important than anything else, and we should strive with all our might to be (quite literally) on the side of the angels. But what of the last part of today's Gospel? Jesus says,

Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old. (Matt 13: 52)

This is the one which fascinates me. The new treasures as well as the old. We can look at this several ways:

- The Old and New Testaments: in the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly associates himself with the prophecies of the old prophets, particularly Isaiah, but also Micah and others. And then he himself comes to earth. So there is old teaching which is still valid and important, and new teaching which builds on the old.
- A new disciple has much to learn from an older one. We pass on our knowledge and love of God to those who follow, such as our children. The old ways are continually being renewed, and faith which has had years to develop and strengthen is valued along with the faith of the new disciple. This has been true since Paul first wrote to his newly-planted churches to encourage them to keep growing their faith. We older disciples have a responsibility to pass on our faith to the new generation.
- If we see God as the owner of the house, then we can see Jesus's statement as the assurance that God is here yesterday, today and tomorrow, and that God will continue to bless us abundantly. He will always bring us treasures in the form of grace and blessings, as he has always done.
- The Bible itself is a storehouse of treasures, some older, some newer; and as Paul says, all scripture is valuable for teaching. This is an encouragement to deepen our faith, for the further we go in understanding God and his word, the more rewarding it will be for us.

Do we begin to get the picture? Is Jesus reaching us with his parables?

If we are right in our interpretation, the kingdom of God is a place of God's blessings forever bestowed on those who turn to him in love and worship. To get to the kingdom, or to realise our cry of "thy kingdom come," we must continually seek to deepen our faith and to bring others along with us. The parables themselves

are a worthwhile object of study and help us to deepen our understanding of God. If their meaning were obvious, they would not be so fascinating or worthy of study. I thank our Lord Jesus Christ that he gives us these teachings. And I thank our God that we are given the gift of participating in his great work, the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.