

NOT USED – WORTH AMENDING & WORKING ON

Today sees the final publication of that paper that has been the centre of the phone hacking scandal for the last few years. The News of the World is now no more. A number of years ago their advertising slogan was ‘All human life is here’. I recall Rev John Bartlett observing that this could be more truthfully said of the Bible. For in the Bible we see humanity at its best and at its worst; the full range of human emotion from deep despair to exultation.

Over the last number of weeks we have been reading from Genesis and we are now moving on to the story of Jacob, one that we will be following for the next few weeks. This is a story that encompasses all aspects of our human nature. The Jacob story is part of that bigger saga, the story of an emerging people with the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

It is a very human story with God involved at each stage in that story, beginning with God’s call to leave his homeland and travel to a distant land. With that call there is the promise of descendants. From the very outset the promise seems to stall, for Sarai is barren. But after a long wait, and Abram trying to force the pace by having a child by his wife’s hand maid Hagar, Sarai conceives and bears a son Isaac.

Again the promise seems to stall. First there is the demand on Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and then Isaac’s wife, Rebekah, herself proves to be barren. But she in turn conceives and, as we read this morning gives birth to

twins, Esau and Jacob. Each stage in this story involves a gracious act of God, each stage is an outworking of God's grace.

So begins the complex story of Jacob and his relationship with his twin brother Esau and his father in law Laban. It is a story of intrigues, of jealousies, of resentments. Jacob, the younger of the brothers, obtains the birthright and the blessing due to Esau, leaving a rift between the two brothers. Jacob, captivated by Rachel's beauty, is tricked into marrying her less attractive older sister; such is his devotion to Rachel he works for another seven years.

Jacob, in common with his forbears, is presented as a real human being, with all his strengths and failings. Yet it is through Jacob that God chooses to act. The key to it all lies in that word 'grace'. As I said at every stage in this saga of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob involves an outworking of God's grace. God is not limited by human frailty, God works in and through the imperfection of our human nature.

There is a profound statement in a book by Philip Yanci that we have at home, 'What is so amazing about grace?' It is something of a polemic against a spirituality that on the one hand proclaims justification by faith and then piles on a whole catalogue of rules. It is this, 'There is nothing I can do to make God love me more and there is nothing I can do to make God love me less.' That is grace, that is the free unmerited love of God to which I can only respond.

This is a common thread that runs right through the Bible. God did work through Jacob, in all his frailty, as he did through David, through Peter, through Paul in all their ambiguities. All these found themselves in service almost despite of themselves – David the youngest of the sons of Jesse, who knew his times of failure before God; Peter so enthusiastic and at times so weak; Paul – arch persecutor of the Church, severe and hard to work with at times – and at other times so caring. As John Bartlett said of the Bible, ‘All human life is there.’ God could take each one of these very different characters, in all their strengths and inadequacies, and make up what is lacking.

God takes us, strange creatures that we are, in all our strengths and weaknesses, our many gifts and inadequacies and calls us to his service. Today we each offer ourselves, that he may send us out in the power of his Holy Spirit to live and work to his honour and glory so that through unlikely beings like you and me his Kingdom may be advanced in our homes, our streets, the places where we work and play.