

Dear Friends,

## GENESIS 25: 24-28

Rebekah is having a difficult pregnancy. The twins growing inside her are struggling with each other. Each is determined to be the first to be born. Rebekah will be relieved when it's all over. Although the birth itself is to be feared. I once read that at this time about one in three women died in childbirth. The child who will grow up to be her favourite son will himself have a favourite wife who will die giving birth. Rebekah will never meet her. Nor will she meet the many grand children from that side of her family. All of that's for later.

The babies are born. Rebekah survives. Esau wins the struggle to be the first to be born. But Jacob quickly follows, his hand gripping Esau's heel. Jacob is a born wrestler who will take on all comers, even God.

In the oracle that Rebekah was given she was told that her children would be like two nations who are divided against each other. They may be twins but they are total opposites. The division can be seen in many ways. Esau is born hairy. Jacob has smooth skin. Then, when they grow up Esau becomes a skilful hunter, a man of the field, who loves the outdoors. While Jacob is quiet and prefers the indoor life of the tents.

As they remind us of two nations, Edom and Israel, so they also remind us of two ways of life. Esau is like a nomadic hunter who travels from place to place. Jacob like those who live a more settled life. Different cultures grow up around these two ways of living. Those who belong to one culture become suspicious of those from the other. Rivalries develop, as does fear and prejudice. So, on the surface we have a story about two brothers. But there are other levels about different groups of people and whether they can learn to live together. Can we rise above "Them" and "Us" to a world of "We"?

Division and conflict within families is central to the book of Genesis. In the early chapters we meet the first brothers, Cain and Abel. Cain murders Abel and then asks the question "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to his question, we are meant to understand is "Yes". Rivalries between brothers will continue with our story about Jacob and Esau. It will go on with Jacob's sons in the Joseph story. We may also notice the examples of sisterly conflict. Jacob will marry two sisters Leah and Rachel. This forces them into a position of rivalry. Earlier there's the struggle between Abraham's wife Sarah and her servant Hagar. There are differences between us and our ways of living. Conflicts happen between people. Can we find ways to live in peace and accept that we are each other's keepers?

I wonder what else we are being told in the detail that Jacob lived in tents. At one level it is just a contrast. There's Esau who likes the outdoors and Jacob who prefers it inside. But it has been noticed that the tents were considered to be the place for women. Is Jacob able to contain a healthy balance by being at home with

both the masculine and the feminine? Or would that be a rather too contemporary way of looking at this story?

Jacob is also described as being quiet or mild. It could be translated as upright or blameless. We are about to find out if any of these words describe him well.

Isaac and Rebekah as parents each have their own favourite child. Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of the food that he brought back from his hunting trips. The Hebrew says he loved him "For the game in his mouth". That could be Isaac liked the taste of the meat in his own mouth. But it could be a picture of Esau returning like an animal predator with the kill in his own mouth. By contrast Rebekah loved Jacob. We are not given a reason for her love as we are for Isaac's choice of Esau. Maybe she treasures that oracle in which she was told that Jacob would be the stronger whom Esau would serve. She wants to be in tune with God's choice.

All this division and favouritism is not very promising. Let's hope that they don't end up like Cain and Abel, with one murdering the other. Let's hope that they can embrace each other and learn to walk side by side in peace.

God bless you,

Tony