

Dear Friends,

## GENESIS 25: 19-23

Rebekah left her country, her family, her home to go to a land that she did not know. There she and Isaac became wife and husband. Perhaps she remembered the blessing her family gave her as she left. "May you become thousands of myriads". I imagined her thinking that thousands of myriads sounded like a lot of children and maybe just one would do, or twins who she hoped would play nicely together. Time passed, a lot of time passed and no children came. They hoped to have children. They wanted to have children. It just did not happen.

Today, we choose to live in a variety of ways. No one way is better or higher than any other. Some live by themselves; some in community; some find someone special; some have children, some don't. There are people living full and happy lives in all of these different ways. Some end up living not exactly as they wanted, but they nevertheless flourish as they are. Many hope to have children. For some it just never happens. For these a lot of the stories in the Bible are unhelpful and hurtful. There are many about couples who take a long time to have children and only do when God eventually acts to make it happen. For good reasons people find these difficult and painful. I think they are less about human fertility and more about God's project. They are a way of saying that God's work can only continue if God acts to give it a future. Human effort, all we do, will not be enough if God is not playing the leading part. Today we would find more sensitive ways of saying this.

Rebekah and Isaac live for years with the disappointment of not having children. Then Isaac prays to God and God answers his prayer. Pregnancy is hard for Rebekah. It feels less like a little baby and more like two armies at war within her. She doesn't know yet, but she is going to have twins. They are described as struggling together. It could be translated to say that they oppress each other. These appear to be very conscious babies who are keenly aware that there's a big advantage to being the first to be born.

Rebekah prays. She is suffering so much that she can barely engage her mind and get out her words. She says, "If ... why .... this way ... am I?" Or it could be an incomplete sentence "Then why am I ..... ?" God hears her cries and answers. She receives a prophecy, an oracle. She is told that within her there are two nations. They will be divided. One will be stronger than the other. And, against custom and tradition the elder will serve the younger. There is no evidence that Rebekah ever shares this prophecy with Isaac or with her children. Perhaps she holds it secretly in her heart. Maybe she sometimes feels as though she needs to force the circumstances in order to help God to make the prophecy happen.

The oracle also gives us a clue as to how to read these biblical stories. At one level they are everyday stories of ancient folk. But there are other levels. For example, the individuals remind us of nations and how they interact. So, Jacob is Israel and Esau is a nearby country, Edom.

Back on the everyday level. Two unborn babies are struggling with each other. Each wants the advantages of being the first out of the womb. When, unknown to them, in this instance, the real advantage lies in coming second.

There are moments when, to Rebekah's great relief, they are quiet. In these moments perhaps she imagines that when they are born, they will stop fighting and play nicely together. We'll see.

God bless you,

Tony