

Dear Friends,

GENESIS 25: 29

Jacob and Esau are twins. But they are total opposites. Esau as the first born has rights and privileges. But Jacob was born straight afterwards with a tight grip on Esau's heel. They started fighting in the womb and Jacob has not given up the struggle to wrestle those rights and privileges away from Esau and into his own possession.

One day Jacob is cooking a stew. At one level he's just preparing food. We all have to eat. But Jacob is a wheeler and dealer; a mover and a shaker. He is always plotting or working on some plan. So, you can't help feeling that what he's doing in the kitchen is a bit of a symbol. We might say that he's cooking something up.

Jacob knows that he has his mother's love. But perhaps he would also like to wrestle his father's love away from Esau and to himself. He knows that Isaac loves the food that Esau brings. Perhaps he too should put some food into his father's mouth. He is, however, always ready to adapt his plans if another opportunity presents itself. Which it does, in the form of Esau.

Esau comes in from the field. He exits his own space and enters Jacob's space. Jacob is on home ground. He has an advantage. He starts with the upper hand. Esau's hunting has clearly not gone well. Hunters like Esau eat when they catch something and go hungry when they don't. Those with a more settled life, who farm and take care of the flocks, those like Jacob have more of a chance of measuring out what they have and making it last. Esau thinks only of the here and now, of the present moment. Now he is hungry. He says that he is famished that he's about to die. He can be a bit hot headed with a tendency to exaggerate.

He sees Jacob's pot of food and says, "Let me gulp down some of that red red stuff". The word "red" does appear twice. The word "gulp" is most often used for animals who are feeding. Esau's stomach is doing all the talking. He has given his reason and common sense the morning off. He can smell food. Jacob can smell an opportunity.

"Yes" says Jacob, "You can have some of this food. I'll sell it to you in exchange for your birthright". As the firstborn, Esau has certain rights. He has material benefits. He will inherit the lion's share of their father's estate. In Genesis there's another dimension to take into account. God has blessed Abraham and then in the next generation Isaac. Who is going to inherit the blessing? Will God become known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Esau or as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Have either of them any idea of the importance of this? Has Rebekah shared the oracle that was given to her while she was pregnant? A prophecy that revealed that God favoured the younger brother. Is Jacob striving with all his might to get what God has already decided to give?

Jacob is not coming out of the story smelling of roses. He does not seem to know that he is his brother's keeper. If his brother is hungry and he has food, he should feed him. Not demand the most valuable thing he has in exchange for one simple meal. What happened to the spirit of Abraham who gave a feast to hungry travellers? Or what happened to the spirit of Rebekah who worked so hard to give water to a stranger and his ten thirsty camels?

Esau is not coming out of the story smelling of roses either. He does not think about the future and whether he will later regret what he's doing now. It's certain that when you are really hungry you cannot think of anything but how to satisfy that hunger. But I'm not convinced that Esau's quite as famished and close to death as he is saying.

Before Jacob will hand over the food, he requires Esau to swear. This will make what he says absolutely binding. I imagine Jacob piling up a plate, taking it towards Esau, but then holding it back while he says "First swear that you'll give me your birthright". Esau swears. Jacob hands over the food. Esau called it "red red stuff". To him maybe the red looked like the blood from meat. If he was hoping for a juicy steak, he was disappointed. What Jacob gives him is lentil stew, with a side order of a bit of bread.

And Esau "ate and drank and got up and went his way". Because that's Esau. He just follows his appetites. He lives in the present moment, which is good, but it's important also to give some thought to the future. How is what you do now going to affect how things will be later? It's important also to give some thought to what you make your heart's desire and to what you choose to give your life. Esau has settled for leaving his mind on simmer while he busies himself with meeting his basic needs and instincts. Maybe Jacob's gaze is fixed on more distant horizons. Many years later Paul a Christian writer will say, "Set your mind on things that are above". And Jesus will say, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". Is our story teller suggesting any of that? They choose to end the story by simply saying that Esau despised his birthright.

Where are we going with this? At the moment I'm following a path of readings given to us in the lectionary. The lectionary gives us passages from the Bible to look at each Sunday. It gives us three more weeks with Jacob. However, it does not give us the climax to the story of Esau and Jacob. Which would be a pity. Esau and Jacob's relationship is about to get even worse. Esau will make plans to kill Jacob. Esau's threatening presence will hover over Jacob until they come to their final showdown. We wouldn't want to miss that would we?

God bless you,

Tony