

Dear Friends,

GENESIS 29: 25-35

Jacob has worked for Laban for seven years. He was promised that at the end of his time of service he would be marrying Laban's daughter Rachel. The time has come, the marriage has taken place. But on the morning after the wedding night Jacob discovers that he has consummated a relationship not with Rachel but with her sister Leah.

The Jewish teachers dreamed up a conversation between Jacob and Leah. They imagined how all-night long Jacob had been calling out to Leah saying "Rachel ... Rachel", and she had been answering him. In the morning when he sees that it's Leah, he is angry.

He says, "You are a deceiver and the daughter of a deceiver".

Leah replies, "Is there a teacher without pupils? Did not your father call you Esau, and you answered him! So too did you call me, and I answered you".

Leah points out that she has only done to him what he did to his father. He is getting his come uppance. He who tricked others is tricked himself. He deceived his father by pretending to be his brother, Leah has deceived him by pretending to be her sister.

There is nothing to be done. Jacob and Leah are now legally bound to each other. I wonder if this led to Jacob always finding Leah challenging. In this moment she has cracked him open. She has given him the experience that he has given to others. Now he knows what it's like to be deceived and how much it hurts. She has held up a mirror before him. In it his unvarnished truth is revealed. Any illusions he built up about himself cannot survive this. It is a moment of grace if he can receive it. It's good to face the real you and come to terms with yourself. It can be healthy and life giving. But perhaps Jacob can never quite forgive Leah for it.

In Genesis, when Jacob complains to Laban, Laban points out that it is not done to give the younger before the first born. That too is a rebuke to Jacob who is the younger brother who has supplanted his older, first-born brother. Laban however has a suggestion. He says, "Finish the week of bridal celebrations with Leah; at least let her have that. Then, you can have Rachel as well in return for serving me for another seven years".

Jacob agrees and that's what happens. But the next seven years won't be like the first seven. The first seven seemed to him like a few days because of his love for Rachel. The next seven will be filled with conflict, struggle and pain. There will be pain for Leah as she knows that she is not as much loved as her sister. There will be pain for Rachel as she watches Leah having children while she doesn't. There will be a persistent conflict between Jacob and Laban as each tries to get the upper hand over the other.

How must Leah and Rachel feel to be treated like this by their father? Jacob comes before Moses so the laws of Leviticus have not yet been given. When these laws are given, they will say this, "You shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive". Leah and Rachel are not given the respect that is rightly theirs, the treatment of them is cruel and wrong.

Laban is also less than generous to his daughters. When Rebekah went away to be married, she went with several maids and her nurse. Leah and Rachel will be given just one maid each. In a few years' time, Jacob will suggest that they all together get away from Laban. Leah and Rachel will quickly agree. They say "There is nothing left for us with our father. He sees us as foreigners. He has sold us and used up for himself the money given for us". How horrific and sad for daughters to be made to feel that way by their father.

Leah's pain comes across strongly. She has been sold by her father and her husband loves her less than his other wife, her sister. She expresses her feelings in what she says as her children are born. When her first child Reuben is born, she says "The Lord has looked on my affliction, surely now my husband will love me". When Simeon arrives, she says, "Because the Lord has seen that I am hated, he has given me this son also". When Levi makes an appearance she says, "Now this time my husband will be joined to me because I have borne him three sons". She will have three more sons and a daughter, Dinah. The sixth son is Zebulun. When Zebulun is born Leah says, "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honour me because I have borne him six sons".

Leah's sadness will also be felt by her children. Rachel's first-born son Joseph will be Jacob's favourite child. His other children will know that they are less loved.

Rachel and Leah will not get to read the book of Ruth. That comes later. But we've read it and we can remember that people blessed Ruth by saying, "May she be like Rachel and Leah who together built up the house of Israel". Rachel and Leah have no idea that they are building a nation while they struggle with these messy, tangled relationships. They cannot imagine that they will be honoured by future generations. If Leah could only have known, while she was feeling so unloved, that the line of Priests would come through her and through her son Levi, that Moses would also come through that line, that King David would come through her son Judah, and from a Christian perspective that Jesus would also be traced back through Judah and Leah.

We may be wondering where God has been in the muddle and the mess that we've been describing, in the hurt that people have been causing each other, in the conflict through which they have been struggling. When we step back, we realise that God is there, patiently and persistently working. When we're in the middle of things we may not be able to see it. It may sometimes take forty-two generations for God's work to produce fruit. But God goes on saying to you, "I have a plan for you, not for your harm but for your welfare". It's not always easy to see but we may trust that it is so.

God bless you,

Tony