



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 12th July 2026

Readings: Genesis 25: 19 – 34; Romans 8: 1 – 11; Matthew 13: 1 - 13, 18 - 23

Proper 11

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty (Matthew 13: 8).

Of the variety of themes I could have taken this morning, I decided to reflect on the story of Jacob and Esau in our Old Testament reading, not so much because I wanted to but because I thought I should. There were several reasons: I have only preached on this story once before, because I find Jacob to be an almost totally unattractive character. I recall once being at a meeting of the URC Inter-Faith Relations Committee between Jewish and United Reformed Church representatives. We spent the best part of 24 hours in Bible study, and I was impressed, as I have been on other occasions, by the way in which Jewish Rabbis interpret the Torah (the Pentateuch). Every Sabbath a part of the Torah is read and if desired a second reading comes from the rest of the Old Testament: it is the Rabbi's task to expound what has been read. So that is why I thought I should do the same.

What is the point of this story? What can we make of it? What can we make of it today? The Book of Genesis is roughly divided into four main groups of stories: the Creation stories, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. Chapters 25-27 contain a few stories about Isaac, but arguably they are really a prelude to the Jacob stories with the primary intention of explaining why the descendants of Jacob (Israel) were antagonistic to the Ishmaelites. (You will remember that Ishmael was Abraham's son by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl and therefore Isaac's older brother, and that Esau eventually went to the land of Ishmael for a wife and ended up living in Edom, south of the Dead Sea, i.e. on the edge of the promised land. In so far as the crucial event in the Pentateuch is the Exodus and the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai, the Joseph stories explain why the Children of Israel were in Egypt in the first place; and the Jacob stories explain why the younger of Isaac's twin sons rather than the older was the one who continued Abraham's line.

Two reasons are given for this turn of events. The first, in this story, is that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob; and the second, in chapter 27, is that Jacob (at Rebekah's instigation) deceived Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing that was intended for Esau. One thing stands out: nowhere in the biblical text is any excuse or justification offered for Jacob's conduct - nor is it ever suggested that God approved of Jacob's conduct; the nearest we come to that is the curious story in chapter 32 of Jacob's wrestling all night with the man who put his thigh out of joint, but he was given the name 'Israel' because he had striven with God and with man, and had prevailed. Jacob therefore is absolutely human, subject to all the temptations to cheat and deceive for personal gain, that we all are. (Indeed, if there is any attempt to shift the blame away from Jacob it is the suggestion that his mother put him up to the idea of getting his father's blessing in chapter 27.)

But that does not apply to the birthright story. This is presented as a story of a hunter and herdsman. Jacob had a secure food supply because of his crops; Esau, the hunter, did not. One day when he came in hungry, he asked for some of Jacob's lentil stew. Jacob said 'Yes, if you sell me your birthright.' Esau's response was perfectly rational. If he was going to die of hunger anyway, his birthright was of no use to him. The text comments interestingly, 'Thus Esau despised his birthright (v 34).' In other words, the suggestion is that he didn't care sufficiently about it to deserve it, which is serious in a patriarchal society where the rights of property descend to the eldest. Being the oldest carries certain responsibilities; Esau rejected them. This verse may, therefore, be an attempt to explain the story - or to justify God's subsequent action. In fact, much of Genesis is a sequence of stories which all have unexpected outcomes.

So, what do we make of it? Is it anything more than an interesting folk tale from a faraway people? Possibly not, from some points of view. But let me suggest three different points for your reflection.

First, recall verse 23. 'The Lord says to Rebekah before the boys are born, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder

shall serve the younger'. This is a symbolic story about peoples and nations, as well as two brothers. Conflict between nations, often related, is still very much with us. This story seems to me to be an interesting parable of what was the commonest and most challenging of Jesus's sayings, 'The last shall be first and the first shall be last'. Here the bottom line is 'the elder shall serve the younger' - a total reversal of normal human expectations; though we probably have to remember that Laban, Rebekah's father, tricked Jacob into marrying his elder daughter, Leah, before his younger one. And this is presented to us as 'the Word of the Lord'. That is a salutary reminder to us in considering solutions to international conflict.

Secondly, isn't the story of family strife wearily familiar to anyone who is, or has been, a parent? Is the oldest always right? Does the oldest always deserve to do best? Forget Jacob's deception for a moment. Just think of the way that instinctive reactions are hierarchical - the younger submit to the older. Compare Jesus taking the children. It is also interesting to reflect that in chapter 33 almost immediately after the story of Jacob's all-night wrestling-match comes the story of Esau's reconciliation with Jacob. There is an echo of the language of v 4 'Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him' in the language of Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son (or Elder Brother). Could Jesus have had this story in mind when he told his own? Reconciliation is always needed.

Thirdly, this story of Esau and Jacob can be read as showing how good can be brought out of evil. As I said earlier, for the most part the author of Genesis makes no attempt to defend or justify Jacob as a cheat and a liar. But it is still possible for God to redeem even that. No one is utterly beyond the grace of God. This is the message of Charles Wesley's famous hymn, 'Come O thou, Traveller unknown'. The editors of *Rejoice and Sing* received more letters of protest for leaving that hymn out than 'All things bright and beautiful'. (Isaac Watts declared that this hymn was worth all the verses he had written.) We left it out, not because we didn't appreciate it, but because we felt that the necessity to reduce it for use as a hymn had made it effectively unusable: (the original has 12 verses in *Hymns and Psalms*) and their compilers left out two verses. It is best used as a meditation, with its climactic verse HP7:

'Tis love! 'Tis love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear this whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee.
Pure, universal love thou art,
To me, to all, thy mercies move,
Thy nature and thy name is love.

And that last line is the last line of each of the following five verses.

This is why I took my text from the parable of the Sower (in case you have been wondering as I developed my interpretation of the story of Esau and Jacob.) I have preached on that parable often. But the essence of it is that one cannot tell what ground will yield the harvest, or even how much the harvest will be - a hundredfold, sixtyfold or thirtyfold. What we do know for certain is that God is gracious and God is faithful. Amen.

DMT, 12th July 2026