

Last week we left Jacob in the desert, and having fled from the anger of his brother Esau, he experiences a revelation from God in dream and vision. In this dream God confirms to Jacob that the promise God made to Abraham, the promise of a family that will be God's people, a family that will change the world, will come from his grandfather Abraham, through his father Isaac to him. God's promise to Jacob includes the words, 'know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go ...'

After waking from this incredible vision, Jacob takes the stone on which he had rested his head and set it up on a pillar and poured oil on the top of it, calling the place Bethel. Bethel means the house of God.

Jacob sets off from Bethel with an apparent new sense of purpose. He goes in search of the family of Laban, the brother of his mother. He knew his uncle would take him in, that's what families did and within Jacob there existed that same impulse that seems common to the human condition - a desire for security and warmth, to be within the circle of those to whom we belong by birth and blood, tribe and clan, the family.

Jacob's hope in family is justified and he is welcomed by his uncle with a lot of joy and tears and hugs and kisses. The Jacob that is welcomed by Laban seems somewhat changed from the Jacob we saw deceiving his father and brother, a bit of a wus, hanging onto his mother's apron strings.

When he arrives at a well in the area in which his uncle lives, there are a group of young shepherds waiting for enough of them to gather so they can roll the stone that covers the well when it is not in use. As he is talking to the shepherds, he sees a cute young shepherdess approaching with her flock. Jacob goes and rolls the stone away, on his own. The smooth skinned, hanging around the tents, mummy's boy, has become a strong man. Jacob has changed. There are at least three things we can see that brought about this change. He has spent time alone in the desert, he has survived, he has toughened up. Secondly he has encountered God. Or rather God has made himself known to Jacob. As we saw last week Jacob was such a person God could speak to. And thirdly Rachel happens to Jacob. Rachel, the young shepherdess, Laban's daughter. This is a genuine love story. Jacob falls in love with Rachel, it seems from the moment he laid eyes on her. Love at first sight – it does happen! It's a genuine love in a context that we find hard to understand.

Jacob begins work for Laban, and after a month, Laban says to Jacob, just because you are a relative of mine doesn't mean you have to work for nothing, tell me what wages do you want. Jacob knows exactly what he wants, he wants Rachel for his wife. 'I'll work for seven years for you for your youngest daughter Rachel'. Seems to me by any standards a decent sort of bride price. Seven years of work, seven years of waiting. The scripture says Jacob served his seven years, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for Rachel.

After the seven years Jacob says, give me my wife, my time is completed and I want to be with her. So Laban brings together all the people for a great wedding feast. The next bit in the story we find appalling. But I have a feeling those who first heard the story would have chuckled away at Jacob's naivety. They had guessed what would happen even if Jacob couldn't see it coming.

Laban had two daughters, Rachel was the younger of the two. Leah, the oldest was described as having weak eyes. I'm not sure what that means, except there was no queue of prospective husbands lining up for her. By contrast Rachel is described as being lovely in form and beautiful.

The wedding day arrives, a great party well into the night. No electric lighting, but plenty of intoxicating wine and wedding vales. Jacob awakes the next morning to find lying next to him, not his beloved Rachel, but her older sister Leah. 'What have you done to me?'. Jacob asks Laban. 'I have worked for you for seven years for Rachel and you give me Leah instead'. Laban replies 'it is not our custom to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older daughter'. That's the way things are done, almost, you should have known that. See the wedding week out with Leah and then you can have Rachel as your bride as well, but that is going to cost you another seven years. So Jacob ends up with two wives, in fact

he ends up with four, both Leah and Rachel have maid-servants who become part of the package and Jacob fathers sons to them as well. This seems pretty strange to us. Sandra and I were talking about the story and her reaction was something like, custom or no custom, sunshine, no one else would be getting my man and if they did, he wouldn't be getting me! Rachel, Leah, the maid-servants, even Jacob don't seem to question the way things are. As much as Rachel and Jacob love each other, the personal feelings are secondary to the needs and ways of the family, the tribe.

Children are the focus of the next part of the story. Actually sons are the focus. Jacob has twelve sons born to Leah, the maid-servants and Rachel. These sons each become the patriarchs, the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. There seems to be at this stage of religious development, no understanding of life beyond death. The value of a person's life, their eternal impact and influence was through their children. The prospect of more descendants than there are stars in the heavens, the promise made to Abraham, that was wealth indeed. From a woman's perspective, to be a mother, particularly of sons – that was the fulfilment of her greatest desires. Children are highly valued, desired beyond anything else. God can give no greater gift than children. The worst curse that can fall on a woman is to be barren. The competition between Leah and Rachel and their maid-servants to have children, is the story that dominates the next seven years in Jacob's life.

We quite correctly look to the scriptures for answers about life. Our lives and how we may live our lives in ways that are God honouring and life-giving. How do we use a story like the story of Jacob and Rachel to speak to us today? We can take aspects of the account that we can relate to. Jacob's love for Rachel. Jacob's maturing as a man under God's blessing, but what about the story as a whole. It's context is so different to our lives. The cultural values and practises so different. I want to suggest that it is these differences that can teach us.

That the differences can be used, not so much to give us answers as to give us questions. We have cultural values, we are no different than Laban who said, 'It is not our custom'. We tend not to be aware of our own values until they are questioned by a different set of values. I remember becoming aware of this at the time of the death of Billy T. James. Billy was Maori with a Pakeha wife. When he died there was a very public dispute over where he should be buried. From a Pakeha perspective, I found the public dispute somewhat distasteful, to me it was obvious that the spouse, his wife, would make such decisions, the proper way.

It came as a surprise to me to realise that from a Maori perspective, the public dispute as to where Billy T would be laid to rest, was an honour, such was the status of the man, the mana, that everybody wanted to claim him as theirs, and secondly from a Maori perspective it was obvious he belonged to his family, not his spouse, they would make the decisions.

Not only did I not realise that this was not a matter of one being right and the other wrong, but that these customary traditions challenged my own. Why did I hold the beliefs, the values that I did?

In the same way we can allow Jacob and Rachel's story to question us. I describe Jacob as having a basic human need to belong, a desire for the security, the warmth of a circle, a family, a clan, a tribe which was his.

I have finally got around to starting a moderate size building project around my house. I have been blown away by the help I am receiving from the family of St Johns. We don't have the extended family commitment, not to the degree experienced in Jacob's day, but God has given us something else, the family of Christ. The need to be part of such a family is intrinsically part of us. It's the way we are designed. What sort of family are we? That's a question Jacob's story can challenge us with. If the body of Christ, the Church, the family of God, is God's replacement for the extended family, the clan, the tribe, then what sort of family are we? I experience St Johns as a loving, caring, supportive, encouraging, helpful family. But I am right in the centre of the family. What's it like on the edge? The stranger who comes new to us but in their coming says I am family. That's more likely the test. A church consultant I read a lot of some time ago, said every church he visited told him they were a very friendly church. He said, of course that was true, because everyone who didn't find them friendly, left.

What are we like as a welcoming family?

I could tell you some good stories and some bad stories about St Johns as a caring family, but I just want Jacob's experience to raise the question for us. One little point though. I know nearly every person here, but I can't remember everyone's name. I long to be one of those

people who instantly remembers names. But I don't. I am only telling you this to let you know you are not alone. Too often we hold back from being friendly because we know we should remember this person's name and we can't. It's nice when people remember your name, but it's even nicer when they make an effort to take an interest in you, even if they, like you, forget names they feel they should know. Even if you can't remember someone's name, make an effort, it says I care enough to embarrass myself with the truth that I have forgotten your name!

Fancy your dad deciding who you will marry, substituting your sister to marry the one you love, then eventually sharing your man, with other wives. It's not the sort of stuff modern kiwi women would put up with. I don't deserve to be treated like that. Rachel, Leah, the maid-servants, even Jacob, what happened to them was secondary to the perceived common good.

You are important, Jesus died on the cross for you. My rights, what I deserve, equality for everyone, beginning with me. These are values of ours that clash significantly with the values expressed in Jacob and Rachel's story. Again I suggest we can use this clash of values to help us look at our own values. Sure, Jesus died on the cross for me, I am that important, but even in doing that he demonstrated self-sacrifice, others first, dying to self to live. And the scripture says, 'God so loved the world...' As a part of the world, that includes me. The question I think the story asks is, have we taken our individualism too far? Have we personalised the gospel too much? Is life firstly about me?

In Jacob's culture there was no greater gift than children. Children were more valuable than a long life, good health, financial security, happiness, the top of the list – children.

Could we say that about our culture? Not in general we couldn't, not just the abortion rate, but the birth rate indicates that children don't hold the value they once did. A recent article about Europe attributes the rise of Islam in Europe to the European birth rate. It requires a birth rate of 2.1 to maintain a steady population. The average birth rate in Europe is 1.5. In Germany it's 1.3, In Italy and Spain it's 1.2. European countries are not replacing their work force. To maintain their economy they need to import labour. The bulk of that labour comes from Muslim countries.

Our western culture is obsessed with sex, but not with children.

The place of the family

The place of the individual

The place of children.

Rachel and Jacob's values were very different to ours. We don't think they had it right, have we?