Sermon for 15th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

i

I have never been pregnant myself, but I have seen others go through it, including my wife with our three sons. I’m not sure that qualifies me as an expert on the matter, but I do wonder what it must be like to have a new person who is of you and within you, yet who is not you but growing into somebody else. Aside from the morning sickness, backache and many other less romantic effects of pregnancy and childbirth, I suspect for many if not most women there is inevitably a spiritual dimension also.

Certainly, the bible has a series of women who become especially attuned with God during their pregnancy. I wonder whether the majority of women feel that encountering the mystery of new life find that it imbues them with a deeper sensitivity to spiritual realities. Pregnancy was certainly a spiritual experience for women such as Rebekah in today’s passage, but also for Hannah who bargained with God to dedicate any son to the priesthood, Elizabeth who knew she must break with convention and call her son, John; and Mary who knew of her son’s divine incarnation whom she was to call Jesus.

Rebekah, rather like Sarah her mother-in-law, was married for many years before she became pregnant. According to Jewish tradition it was after twenty years of marriage that Isaac’s prayer for a son was finally answered. The tussle Rebekah felt in her womb between the two children made her go herself to God for an explanation. To her was revealed a remarkable prediction of the future course of events. The younger would break with convention and become the master of the elder. This explains Rebekah’s connivance with Jacob when he acted to steal his blind father’s blessing from his elder brother, Esau. Rebekah believed Jacob was acting in accordance with God’s will.

In today’s passage from Genesis 25:19-34, Jacob buys his brother’s birthright for a pot of stew.

Traditionally, Esau as the elder brother inherited leadership of the clan from his father, but Esau proves himself as unfit for that role as the younger Jacob proves himself to be ideally suited. Jacob stayed at home and studied at the feet of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham, learning the stories of his people and assimilating the nature of their God. Esau, however, was not interested in such matters. Esau preferred a carefree life, out hunting and enjoying himself in manly pursuits.

Jacob recognises the unfitness of his brother to lead their clan in the way that was required and so challenges Esau to sell his birthright for the pot of stew Esau covets so strongly. If Esau had been a worthy successor to Abraham and Isaac, he would have told Jacob where to go, but he didn’t. Jacob’s assessment of his brother was correct. Esau is not tricked into giving his inheritance away. He even goes through a formal ceremony to swear that he is giving his birthright to his younger brother. There was time for Esau to reconsider before he did such a dreadfully disrespectful thing, but he went through with it for the sake of a pot of stew.

In this episode we see one of the first examples of how God will continue to operate. God will choose appropriately, breaking human conventions when necessary, in order to put the right person in the right place at the right time. What God chooses is not what convention dictates, but according to the spiritual responsiveness of any would-be servant.

Jacob is one such appropriate choice that defies convention. David, the youngest of Jesse’s sons who is small and has the eyes of a girl, is another. Jesus, a carpenter from Galilee, is another. Disciples who are fishermen, tax collectors and women with questionable morality are another. For those of us within the Methodist tradition, Wesley would be numbered in that disparate band of unconventional yet appropriate choices God has made down the ages to get the right person into the right place at the right time.

Recent Methodist-Catholic dialogue documents speak of the extraordinary nature of Methodist origins, suggesting that Methodism sprang up as an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit as God raised up a people at the right time through Wesley to spread scriptural holiness ( See: *The Grace Given You in Christ §106*).

ii

St Paul makes the same point in his famous passage from Roman 8.

Those whose minds are set on ‘the sinful nature’ are motivated by their worldliness and they are hostile to God’s Spirit. But those who have ‘the Spirit of Christ’, which Paul is using as a synonym for the Holy Spirit, are the ones whose lives God can use.

It does not matter now what position of prestige is held, what position of power a person has inherited, or even what one’s educational status might be. What determines whether God can use you or not is determined by one’s spiritual responsiveness. This is the determining factor in Christ’s kingdom, not inherited privilege.

This is explosive stuff. No wonder Jesus has to explain the meaning of the *Parable of the Sower* to his disciples in private in Matthew 13:18-23. God is turning away from the appointed religious leaders in Jerusalem and appointing new shepherds of the flock – and their spiritual responsiveness, whether they are ‘good soil’ for the seed of the gospel is the sole factor that God takes into account.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear” – these are the concluding words of the parable to the crowd. This indicates the subversive nature of what the parable is about. Jesus can’t say anything too obvious at this stage, but his veiled comments are not veiled to those who listen with close attention and an openness to God’s Spirit.

iii

The *Parable of the Sower* is one of Jesus’ best known and best loved parables. There are several levels on which it can be understood. In today’s context of the Jacob and Esau story and the passage from *The Letter to the Romans*, there are several points that spring to mind.

The first point is surely a word of encouragement to the Church going through difficult times. Things do not always run smoothly. Expectations of people are sometimes misplaced, but the seed is plentiful enough for God to be able to get around an indifferent Esau, or cope with a stony path or the choking weeds of worldliness. If God truly wants something to happen, God can be relied upon to find the right person for the task. We should not despair when someone lets us down or times are unrewarding.

Secondly, only a little seed needs to fall on ‘good soil’ for a mighty harvest to blossom. What or who turns out to be ‘good soil’ for the gospel may well surprise us. The only surprise is how we are still surprised by God’s unconventional choices. We ought to know how God works by now. God will not follow rules and conventions. God will not use people just because they hold some office or other or have inherited some position, but will always seek out the truest hearts, even if they are the hearts of the humble and weak. For in the Spirit, the weak and made strong and the lowly are lifted high.

This brings me to another point which concerns the responsibility of discipleship. Despite what I have just asserted about not losing hope in difficult, unresponsive times because God can find the right person for the task, my second point that God will not blindly follow convention cuts both ways. It is the responsibility of the Church to remain ‘good soil’ for the gospel.

Sometimes the Church may be holding on through difficult times because the age and location is a stony path to walk; but sometimes barren periods have less to do with the prevailing conditions in the world and more to do with the failures of the Church.

We need to remember that just because one time in history we were part of God’s answer, because our forebears were the ‘good soil’ that God could use, that does not mean we can be lazy and complacent as though just because we call ourselves Church, or minister, or priest, or disciple that God has to continue to use us today.

I may be tempted as a Methodist to take justifiable pride that John and Charles Wesley were able to produce such a harvest for the Lord, but that does not absolve me from the continuing responsibility to remain ‘good soil’ for the gospel today.

If I am indifferent about my responsibilities to cultivate my spirituality, then I will be set aside like Esau, irrespective of what Wesley or any other Methodist may have done in the past or be doing elsewhere. No one can rely on past performance as though that guarantees their place in the team. If I am eager but misguided, as Paul was before his encounter on the Damascus road, then no amount of effort, prayer and dedication on my part will produce a harvest if I am no longer properly attuned to what the Spirit is saying to the Church at this time.

Jacob and Esau, Saul who became Paul, the promise that God will search out the ‘good soil’ serve equally as a reassurance and a challenge.

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