Sermon for 16th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43.

i

The recently blessed Jacob who had previously bought his elder brother’s birthright for as little as a pot of stew must now look for a wife. Whilst on his way back north to look for a suitable bride in Haran where his grandfather Abraham had once lived, Jacob has a mysterious dream.

There are several interpretations surrounding this episode which can be found in Jewish sources, but one which particularly appeals to me is the tradition that Jacob dreamed of his ladder to heaven on Mount Moriah – the place where God had provided a ram to spare Jacob’s father Isaac from being sacrificed by Abraham, and subsequently the site of the temple of Jerusalem.

Whatever the historical accuracy of this tradition, it certainly appeals for symbolic reasons. For this place represents a supreme place for divine-human transaction. It is a place, from Abraham’s day to the temple days, and subsequently to the events on a nearby hill called Golgotha, where God has met with the people to deliver them from their sins and proffer them a glimpse of heaven.

Christians note that Jesus used the same image of angels ascending and descending:

You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:51).

St. Irenaeus used the image of the ladder, saying the Church is the ladder to heaven. In the medieval period it became popular to use the image of the ladder as a symbol of ascetic growth in holiness for monastic communities. Others spoke of Jesus being the supreme ladder that connected heaven and earth.

In the passage from Genesis we note that God stands at the top of the ladder and repeats the covenant promises first made to Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham, in Genesis 12 that Jacob shall be the father of a vast nation which shall be a blessing to ‘all peoples of the earth’ (Genesis 28:14). Clearly, God approves of Jacob’s action in taking the birthright from his unworthy elder brother and duping his father into giving his blessing.

This gives Jacob the confidence to carry on. It confirms God is with him on his fateful journey. Jacob needed to know that he had done the right thing. It was not a smooth path for Jacob and he must have had doubts about whether he had discerned God’s will correctly. To borrow St Paul’s words, was he living ‘according to the Spirit’ or ‘according to the flesh’?

ii

In Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* the covenant promises reaffirmed to Jacob have expanded. The world-wide blessing that will stem from Jacob’s progeny is still present, but now there is a cosmic dimension to the promise.

In Genesis 3:17 after Adam and Eve’s sin, God says to Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you.” Since Adam’s wilful disobedience introduced sin into the world, Adam is also responsible for subjecting the whole of created order to death and decay, not through its choice (v20), but as a consequence of Adam’s choice.

Now creation itself is to be redeemed. The resurrection of Christ breaks the hold of death, and now creation can hope to be restored as the place where the descendants of Adam and Eve can once again walk in the ‘cool of the day’ with their God.

Those who are in Christ are the newly adopted children of God, the New Israel, and live in this hope. Those who still live ‘according to the flesh’ are still subject to the power of death, but those who live ‘according to the Spirit’ will share in the resurrection life of Christ.

Living ‘according to the flesh’ is Paul’s way of speaking about unspiritual worldliness that rebels against God and is incapable of keeping the Law and unable to save itself. This is not the same as Greek philosophy which taught that our physical nature was the source of such weakness and sin and so escaping from the physical body at death was to be desired. For Paul, living ‘according to the flesh’ was about the human will to live according to worldly appetites as opposed to living according to spiritual values. In Paul’s Jewish frame of reference, the body was to be resurrected, not escaped, and the earth and all creation renewed, not abandoned.

Christians who take this teaching seriously have good news not just for people, but for creation itself, and in the light of our faltering efforts to safeguard the environment, this is an increasingly important element of our gospel proclamation. There is hope through Christ for the world.

iii

All of this is fine. Jacob has done the right thing after all by taking his brother’s place. Paul has found the new life of the Spirit. Creation itself has been rescued. Yet the world continues to turn and sin and death remain part of the world and part of the Church. We have to continue to live with the weeds. It’s the major challenge confronting faith in God.

God is with Jacob and assures Jacob of his blessing and abiding presence – yet Jacob is still scammed by Laban into working 7 years for Leah and another 7 years for Rachel, his intended bride. Was God on holiday? No, it’s about living with the weeds, accepting present reality, yet living according to future hopes which you trust God will fulfil and is already fulfilling for you, for the Church and for the world.

Paul had discovered the way to live ‘according to the Spirit’, but his life was increasingly filled with beatings, imprisonment, false accusations and disputations among his fellow Apostles and within his churches about food laws and circumcision. Had Paul made a huge mistake in following Christ? No, it’s about living with the weeds.

The *Parable of the Weeds* helps us live in the in-between time of the present age between the resurrection of Christ and the Day of Judgment. The ultimate victory has been secured, but the war with evil continues for now. In the face of the continued power of sin and evil in the world and in the Church it is possible to become faint-hearted about the gospel and wonder if the victory has been won after all.

This parable tells us not to question the quality of the seed, but to take seriously the power of sin and evil. *The Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:1-9), *the Parable of the Mustard Seed* (Matthew 13:31-32)and *the Parable of the Leaven* (Matthew 13:33) and *the Parable of the Net* (Matthew 13:47-50)assure us that the gospel seed will produce a great harvest. We should not lose heart in the face of setback and failure.

God only sows ‘good seed’ and it will produce a great harvest. We should not doubt God or the power of the gospel. Instead, we should take the pernicious effect of sin seriously and never under–estimate the destructive power of evil.

‘*God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year’* says the old hymn. Some days, it takes a lot of faith to believe that. As the world lurches from one crisis to the next, as people continue to suffer, as people continue to act in criminal and immoral ways it can be difficult some days to believe any progress is being made. It can look as though the seed is dying and the longed-for harvest will never materialise.

Hold on, says the *Parable of the Weeds*, the weeds grow among us for now, but ultimately God will deal with those and gather into his barn the bountiful harvest of the gospel. In order to help us to keep on the narrow path that leads to life, out of the blue, like Jacob on his travels to search for a bride, God grants us a reassuring glimpse of divine presence, power and protection.

Then, despite the weeds of sin, death and disappointment around us, we suddenly get that reassuring conviction that in the midst of our messy lives, in the midst of our worries and doubts, we sense that “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” If your faith is flagging a bit at the moment, I hope you don’t have to wait too long for such a reassuring glimpse.

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