

REFLECTION

Today we're continuing our journey with Jacob and his family as we move through his unfolding and intertwined story. We've reached Genesis chapter 29, which as usual has many levels including a romance, he sits on the edge of being pastoral in how he deals with Laban to get what he wanted he knows he can't be bombastic and demanding with Laban, it's also a deeply human story in how it unfolds. This morning we hear, love, betrayal, longing, deception, power and vulnerability, as well as the slow formation of a family out of broken trust. It almost sounds like a movie script! Jacob arrives near Haran in the eastern lands, his life is already affected by complexity from his past actions. He has inherited hope and is now living with the consequences of his own previous deceit. Into this script steps Laban, a man who knows what benefits him, two women, Leah and Rachel, who become Laban's bargaining chips, and Jacob's romantic thoughts concerning Rachel. Jacob met Rachel at a well, when she was watering her father Laban's sheep. After **all** Jacob has been through so far we're left with an image that can feel like a new beginning.

Yet their story quickly exposes just how fragile trust in someone can be. Laban reveals himself to be a strategic thinker and works to achieve what's beneficial to him, despite what he says. We see this in action, when Jacob has worked hard for seven years so he could marry Rachel, only to find the expected exchange of love and marriage being replaced by someone else Leah, her older sister. Laban's 'small' action of swapping daughters turns the relationship into a contract of deception. Trust, once broken, takes a long time to be mended. It's like a stone thrown into a pond – it has consequential ripples.

Jacob's expectations are shattered, Rachel's worth is violated, and Leah's married life begins without being loved, but as part of Laban's strategic plan. Through our Genesis reading today we can name a repeated truth that we face, exploitation of the vulnerable frequently travels through what is social custom, maternal or paternal hierarchy, marriage practices which sometimes occur through open hostilities.

That leads us directly to the exploitation of those who sit on the edges of society. Though Leah and Rachel are both within a family model, their lives are directly affected by the decisions of men who treat them both as gifts that need to be managed not loved. Laban's household operates like a marketplace: labour is traded, brides are issued, with neither woman's desires not considered of value within the transaction. Even Jacob, who appears as a 'labourer', takes part in the exploitation. He agrees to serve Laban for seven more years to correct what was forced on him indicating a moral blindness to those who participate models they didn't design. Jacob becomes both a victim of deceit and a participant as he continues to be part of an unjust arrangement – he goes along with Laban's deceitful strategy.

It isn't hard for us to understand the difficulties and complexity of relationships; we experience difficulties ourselves. When we read about Jacob, Leah, Rachel and Laban we don't really hear it simply as good verses evil. Jacob loves Rachel with all sincerity, however with our knowledge of his earlier life we know he can *also* be manipulative to get what he wants. But here we can learn just how our actions can sometimes come back on ourselves. Laban *is* selfish, yet skilled at survival and how to effectively use social power. Leah isn't just a 'sad character' in the story, we hear her prayers, of her own gradual recognition through her sons, and her own hope. Rachel isn't simply the "beloved", her desire to marry Jacob reveals a pain only sharpened by rivalry. Love, resentment, duty, and bargaining form a strained web of intertwined relationships in Laban and Jacob's household.

The story at the 'well' is a powerful symbol for this where 'life-giving water' becomes the place for love and deception. The story indicates that God's faithfulness is with us in all circumstances and

realities, even when first impressions aren't totally honest. The well is both real nourishment, and revealing, mainly because hearts and minds bring our history to everyone we meet and every conversation we have.

So then, where might God be at work 'in small beginnings; in our everyday life'? Through this chapter we're given a particular kind of answer, in the *quiet presence of God*. The Holy Spirit is quietly present always in the movement of hope through suffering.

God hears. Leah's story includes her discipline of prayer when Rachel is favoured and she isn't. Leah becomes the sister who is 'seen' by God in her humiliation. Her name *isn't* removed, her pain *isn't* somehow unwritten, instead it tells us that God notices what the powerful want to hide. Small beginnings can be the first fragile act of prayer, the first word of hope when every social arrangement says otherwise. It will pay us all well to remember that nothing can be hidden from God.

God continues to create a large family. Despite Laban's distorted overshadowing of tricks and arranged labour, God is still working toward God's promise. Though the relationships in this story are tangled and difficult, we can trust that God doesn't work only through relationships of uncomplicated love; God fairly and lovingly engages in real lives, even those that begin in circumstances that we consider to be unfair.

We also learn from Jacob the hope found in small beginnings of endurance. His second seven years aren't only a response to Laban's fraudulent action, they begin the slow process of learning. The story's moral irony is painful. He's forced to pay in the same currency he once used himself. Yet out of that coerced teaching something new can grow. He feels less entitled, he's humbler, he also begins to take more notice of what covenant faithfulness might require.

We can't take Laban's or Jacob's story as a reason to turn wrong actions of deception or exploitation into something that's acceptable or inevitable. Instead, noticing where God is in small beginnings may mean recognising how God's love, mercy and grace, can bring light into darkness without pretending darkness is good.

This brings us to how might we participate in God's work here and now?

We can practice truth-telling and accountability with kindness and without judgment. Broken trust increases when untruths are treated as part of normal established patterns and people feel they're being judged. Moses' writing shows how long-term suffering can begin with just one calculated manipulative lie. 'The tongue is mightier than the sword.' Participation in God's work might start with refusing to normalise manipulation in families, churches, workplaces, and communities.

Push back on those who desire to treat people as a commodity or perhaps as a resource. Leah and Rachel are constrained by family expectations. Today this may mean advocating for those who sit on the edges of our community being seen as expendable. They could be workers trapped in certain unhealthy work arrangements, victims in coercive relationships, and women or minorities whose voices are ignored or jeered at for having a differing opinion. We can ask ourselves, who holds the power, who is being used for the gain of someone else, what is their motivation?

We can be the circuit breaker and offer real change in a restored relationship. Jacob's story offers a warning that we need to be aware just how easy it is to return to old habits when deceit, manipulation and self-interest takes hold of our spiritual lives and behavioural patterns, that the moment we need to ask ourselves what is acceptable and what isn't.

We could also nurture the kind of love that doesn't require power over another. Love in this reading is repeatedly contaminated by control. Laban over Jacob and Jacob's bargaining, the

rivalry in the household. God's kind of love is different; it doesn't look to replacing people with a desired outcome. God's love honours the dignity of the beloved.

Lastly, we can learn to pray for those we don't see. Those not in the room, on the screen, perhaps not even in our nation. Leah's turning toward God models praying in the valley. A community participating in God's work might include advocacy as well as spiritual attention. Notice those who you're aware are being overlooked, not only during a crisis but as a daily habit. Praying for them, listening to them, and being Christ's hands and feet when needed so they can also have the opportunity to flourish.

Finally, Genesis 29 is both an example of what not to do and an invitation to do better. It indicates exploitation and the manner in which our desire can become entangled with power. It invites us to acknowledge God's continual faithfulness operating within our brokenness through seeing, hearing, and bringing beginnings to grow even when the first steps are compromised. God's work may arrive as an overlooked person lifting their eyes, as tears turning into prayer, as endurance and resilience that refuses to surrender hope. We are called not just to interpret these small beginnings, but to join them by being truthful, caring for the vulnerable, being the circuit breaker of harmful behavioural patterns, and practicing love that declines to treat other people as a means to an end.

Amen