

INTRODUCTION

The Genesis reading is the continuing story of the Dynasty that began with Abraham and Sarah.

Last week you may remember the reading centred on Isaac (Abraham's son) finding his wife Rebekah.

They marry and in today's reading we are 20 years further on. They are childless and Isaac prays for a child and Rebekah becomes pregnant with twin boys.

It is a difficult pregnancy and Rebekah prays that the struggling of her unborn children might cease; but God only offers her a vision of the struggle that will continue after their births. She is told that 'the elder child shall serve the younger' which of course is not the normal course of familial hierarchy of this age. It's a bit like royalty where the older son takes the throne...

Esau is born first and appears 'red' and 'hairy'. The name Esau sounds like the Hebrew word for 'hairy'.

Jacob is born directly after and is grasping on Esau's heel; and the name Jacob is from the Hebrew word for 'heel' – and I have to say he turns out to be a bit of a heel in the way he treats his elder brother!

And they do grow into two very different young men.

Esau is a hunter and becomes his father Isaac's favourite son; while Jacob prefers to work around the home and becomes his mother Rebekah's favourite son!

You can already see how the family dynamic is shaping up...

The tension between these two brothers peaks when Esau comes home from a hunting trip famished. Jacob is cooking a stew and without a word of greeting Esau demands a bowl of it. No love lost between these two boys!

Jacob however demands a price for a bowl of his soup, and that price is no less than Esau's birthright. Esau agrees despising or disregarding his birthright – the same verb 'despise' is used elsewhere in Hebrew scripture to refer to an act of despising God.

Again you can see how things are shaping up here – Esau not only despises his familial connections, but within the context of this biblical dynasty he is also despising God.

Now the birthright of course conferred honour and privilege on the eldest son and also ensured a double share of the family wealth and the assuming of family leadership when the father died. This birthright could be transferred or revoked.

As the story unfolds, and this part we do not hear, Jacob confirms Esau's sale of his birthright when he tricks his father Isaac into giving him the blessing usually bestowed by a father on his eldest son.

Esau is furious and to escape his fury Jacob flees and goes to live with Rebekah's brother Laban.

Esau also leaves home and settles in the area of Edom which means 'red'! The Edomites (the descendants of Esau) and the Israelites, who are the descendants of Jacob, continue to struggle with each other for centuries – a continuation of what began as sibling rivalry between these twin brothers.

The Gospel story is the familiar 'parable of the sower'. Within the context of the Genesis story we are reminded that God sows the word of God generously among all people and that God's work will always yield a harvest despite the tensions and struggles of those who receive the word.

REFLECTION

No matter how much we try there will always be a divergence in aspirations, hopes and dreams within groups of people and particularly within families.

Within a birth family there is little choice – mum is mum, dad is dad and siblings are siblings – that is how it is.

Within other families - the church for example - we do have some choice and we do make choices about the sorts of people we choose to be associated with.

But even here there can be disagreements about direction or theology or use of resources...really the list is endless. People are different and they have

differing views and values – that is what makes life interesting and challenging. It would be a sad, uninteresting and boring world if we all thought the same way.

But sometimes our differences can cause deep pain and can last for generations as did the differences between Esau and Jacob.

I have been watching with some interest the rift between the inspirational preacher Robert Schuler and his son Robert Jnr. and daughter Sheila.

Robert Schuler built an empire over 50 years based on what some see as a gospel of positive thinking. He had a worldwide TV programme called the 'Hour of Power' and built the famous 'Crystal Cathedral' in southern California.

Both his children became preachers.

But the whole edifice has collapsed though a family feud. Robert Snr. and Robert Jnr. had a serious parting of the ways and the church is now in debt to the tune of 50 million dollars. Ironically one of Schuler's books is entitled 'The Power of Being Debt Free'!

Schuler himself has recently been ousted from the church board – a family feud on all fronts....

The Anglican Church is also experiencing its own family feud as expressed by Susan in her 'something to think about' a couple of weeks ago and alluded to in her sermon last week, and on the billboard outside St Mathew's in the city – which again has been vandalised...

So family feuds are nothing new and will always be part of the landscape...

...but where is the gospel message in all this?

The word of God is a word of challenge, a word of encouragement, a word of healing, a word of hope...

As the parable of the sower tells us, sometimes this word never takes root, sometimes it gets choked but still there is the possibility that a good proportion of it will find fertile ground and grow to bear rich fruit.

I once took a funeral where they had been deep family feuding. The daughter viewed her father who had died with some generosity but there was little love lost and she was not going to speak.

Her children (the deceased person's grandchildren) spoke of a typical grandfather who gave them lollies and gold coins and people from his later life spoke of him warmly.

But then his son stood up. He leant on the lectern, eyeballed the congregation in the chapel for a few moments and then said, 'I hated my father!'

What followed was a heartfelt and honest recount of why he hated his father, of all that he had been subjected to over the years.

But then his actions and words is seared into my mind as one of the strongest gospel moments I have ever witnessed.

He stepped down from the podium, tapped the casket and said, 'But now I forgive you dad!' and then he sat down.

You could have heard a pin drop.

This was a moment of not just of honesty and venting, but of reconciliation and healing – Christ at work...

I am not sure how the Robert Schuler feud will pan out either within his birth family or within his church family. There are large amounts of money at stake here as well as large egos, which never helps!

I am not sure how the church feud over the ordination of gay people will pan out; again there are some pretty strident views....

But I am convinced in the truth that 'all things work together for the good' as we hang in there with our family issues and difficulties...

... and as we have open and forgiving hearts the gospel of Christ will break in when we least expect it...

... and we too can tap that coffin and say 'Now I forgive you....'and the word of God will indeed have multiplied a hundredfold and more...!