

A number of years ago, the now thankfully defunct ‘News of the World’ had as its advertising slogan ‘All human life is here’. I remember one of our lecturers at the time remarking that this could more truthfully be applied to the Bible. For in the Bible we see humanity at its best and at its worst, the full range of human emotions from deep despair to exultation.

In our reading from the Old Testament we now move on to the story of Jacob and we will be following it for the next few weeks. This is a story that encompasses all aspects of our human nature. The Jacob story is part of that bigger saga, the story of the relationship of an emerging people with the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

It is a very human story and God is involved at each stage in that story, beginning with God’s call to Abram to leave his homeland and to travel to a distant land; with the call there is the promise of descendants. Almost from the outset the promise seems to stall, for Sarai his wife is barren. But after a long wait, and Abram trying to force the pace by having a son Ishmael by his wife’s hand-maid Hagar, Sara conceives and bears a son Isaac.

Again the promise seems to stall. First there is the demand on Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac and then Isaac’s wife, Rebekah herself proves to be barren. But she in turn conceives and, as we read this morning, gives birth to twins, Esau and Jacob.

Each stage in this story involves a gracious act of God, each stage is an outworking of God’s grace.

There is a profound statement in a book by Philip Yanci that we have at home, “What is so amazing about grace?” It is something of a polemic against a spirituality that on the one hand proclaims justification by faith and then piles on a whole catalogue of rules. It is this; “There is nothing I can do to make God love me more and there is nothing I can do to make God love me less.” That is grace, that is the free unmerited love of God, to which I can only respond.

I have a CD at home by the American singer John Prine called ‘In Spite of Ourselves’ – ‘In spite of ourselves, we’ll end up sitting on a rainbow; in spite of ourselves we will be the big door prize.’ Almost in spite of himself, Jacob finds his place in the story of redemption. The story of Jacob, his relationship with his twin brother Esau, his father in law Laban, is a complex one. It is a story of intrigues, of jealousies, of resentments. Jacob, the younger of the brothers, obtains the birthright due to Esau, leaving a rift between the brothers. Jacob, captivated by Rachel’s beauty, is tricked into marrying her older sister; such is his devotion to Rachel, he works for another seven years.

God did work through Jacob, in all his frailty, as he did through David, through Peter, through Paul, in all their ambiguities. All these found themselves in service, despite of themselves. David, the youngest of the sons of Jesse, was painfully aware of his own times of failure before God. Of course Peter, so enthusiastic and at times so weak; Paul, arch persecutor of the Church, who could be so severe and hard to work with at times and at other times so caring. God could take each one of them and make up what was lacking.

God can and does work through us. He is not limited by our own particular frailties or failings. Like Jacob, David, Peter and Paul we bring to life, bring to our own service of God and his Church our own prejudices, our own conscious and unconscious agendas – even the way society, the way life has moulded us.

In spite of ourselves, we end up sitting on the rainbow, in spite of ourselves we are the big door prize.

The late Brother Roger of Taizé had a lovely insight when he spoke of God working through the littleness, the poverty of our faith. For all we can offer is the faith we have – God works in and through that to bring us further on. God takes us in all our ambiguity. As we are reminded each Christmas as we hear those wonderful words of the Prologue of St John's Gospel:

‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.’

Standing before him, like Jacob, like David, like Peter and Paul, we offer ourselves, as we are, in spite of ourselves, in his service in all our strengths and weaknesses, in all our prejudices and petty agendas. We pray that he may take our service in all its inadequacy, as individuals and as our deeply flawed and wonderful Church; that he may make up what is lacking in the power of his Holy Spirit; that his Kingdom may be advanced in our homes, in our community, in this world God has called us to serve in his name – that in spite of ourselves, we end up sitting on the rainbow, in spite of ourselves we are the big door prize.