

Sermon 27 July 2014 'Hard Promises'
Genesis 29:15-28 Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

Prayer: God of the covenant promise, we live in a world where promises are broken, and where we are not always completely honest with one another. Help us to continue to trust in the promises you have made with us, and help us to create a trusting, covenantal community with all of your creation. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Hard promises or harsh promises? I wonder what Jacob thought and felt! Jacob's story last week was that he left the tents of home, encountered God at a place he named Beth-el, (the house of God), and kept on the 650 km journey to his grandparents / parents tribal people. This week he has arrived! He ***fell in love*** almost immediately with the younger daughter of his uncle, Laban. Jacob and Laban come to an agreement where Laban promises Jacob that if he works for 7 years he can marry Rachel.

Jacob is prepared to give up everything to 'get' his treasure. And after 7 years is presumably delighted to be at his wedding feast – but the trickster is tricked. It's not Rachel but **lovely eyed Leah** in his bed when he wakes up in the morning *after the marriage* feast! Yes, I know we have traditionally been taught that Leah had 'weak' eyes *but the Hebrew says that Leah is the one with 'rakkuth' eyes. The NRSV, New Jerusalem Bible and others translate the term as 'delicate, lovely'. But, the Revised English & RSV translate the term as 'weak'. The word can also mean either 'tender' (Gen 18:17) or 'weak' as in power (e.g. 2 Sam 3:39).

Lots of room to wonder just what Leah's position was – weak in power as a daughter / female **or** weak as in defective, compared to the beautiful Rachel, **or**???? *But it's not really* Leah's story, is it? And the hard promise of working for 7 years for his beloved Rachel has just been broken for Jacob – but he negotiates and Laban get another 7 years of 'free' labour' and Jacob marries Rachel. Jacob gets his treasure but the story isn't by any means over. The trickster despite knowing YHWH God is with him; an earlier promise, & having a personal meeting with YHWH- God, Jacob will continue to trick and make deals on the wrong side and ... *but wait for next week...cV*

The human, *Laban* broke his promise – that's hard in all sorts of ways; but one of the **saddest** ways is that because we all know when promises have been broken in our lives – *or* we know when we broke promises – and because we know how hard that is – we always transfer *something* from this experience **into** our relationship with God – Jesus. I suspect it is one of those life-long discipleship things that we by faith, in faith learn to trust that Jesus knows why we had a hard time; why our prayer answer was a 'no' or a 'not-yet'; why it's hard to trust promises of our Lord and keep faith.

In the faith we have tools to help us. It might not be your definition of a tool – but I think it is because it helps us do the job we are called to do! It helps us in our faith to understand the ways of God in the past - and so how he is at work among us even when we can't tell.

So one of the tools of faith we have is Jacob's story. Here **God kept his promise** to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, the fragile line of inheritance with its stories of blessings and barrenness is still present in Jacob. When Rachel finds it very difficult to conceive, Leah doesn't! But then again neither do Jacob's two concubines (Rachel and Leah's handmaids) from these four women come the 12 tribes of Israel. God's promise took three generations before it was secure in the blood-line of his chosen family / tribe / people. cv

It is hard when **you** don't see a promise fulfilled but in the faith we have stories and scriptures and personal testimony of the times when it is – making it possible to hold on in our own lives and follow Jesus way. Another insight Jacob might offer us is that we know we have great big promises from the Lord – but in the 'here and now' it's hard to hold on to that kind of vision and we have to

work hard to get a hold of the treasure that is gripping us NOW. Jacob had the promise of the generations that was first given to his grandfather, Abraham – but all he wanted was to marry his beloved Rachel. And to marry her he was prepared to work for 14 years!

In our Gospel reading from Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52 Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven “*is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought it.*” In fact Jesus kept teaching about the cost, sacrificial cost involved to be part of the Kingdom as much as the joy, the delight, the hunger driving the searching and the satisfaction of being part of God’s plan. How much has it cost you? **Would** you work for 14 years for your hearts treasure? **What** would it mean for you to work to gain your heart’s desire? To discover treasure in a paddock and sell everything you have to be able to buy the land? To see a pearl that you ‘must’ have.

Taking a little side trip – today we have a lot of different saying from Jesus of what the Kingdom is like and I wonder if one big plus from all the different images is so that we can find one that speaks more strongly to us – I have to admit the glimpse of the kingdom from Jesus about seeing a ‘pearl’ that you **MUST** have really speaks to me, *because I love pearls*. It’s not only the beauty or colours, but also because they are to the oyster an irritant, ‘rubbish’, and get **such a make-over!!!**

The pearl is very small – but it is exactly what Jesus kept saying – small things have enormous influence and God’s kingdom works because when people catch a glimpse they will make great sacrifices to be **part** of it. How much has it cost you? What are you willing to sacrifice to be a part of God’s plan for the world?

Because one of our ^{*1} parables has Jesus saying the net – a seine or drag net will be thrown out and all – **all** will be gathered in; the good, the bad, the pretty the ugly and the rubbish! There will be a time of sorting – not by us – by God’s trained ones – the angels. Jesus says not everyone will have recognised or received the kingdom and these will ultimately miss out on the life it brings.

But for those who ‘understand’ – theirs is the lifelong task of being scribes. ^{*2} Being a scribe was not normally a compliment in Matthew’s gospel, except that these scribes have been “trained, *mathe teu theis*--in the kingdom of heaven.” *Mathete* is also the word for “disciple.” They have been “disciplined” in **the way**.

And what’s more, trained to discern what to keep and what to throw away – at least that’s one understanding of the last parable. ^{*2} This is the one where the householder threw out—*ekballei*, out of his treasure--*ek tou thesaurou*--both new and old. The householder did not bring out. He threw out. He threw out both the new and the old, in order to get rid of both. *Kaina*--“new”--refers to something newly made that is different from what had gone before and not yet used. *Palaia*--“old”--means having existed a long time and is now worn-out and obsolete. Hard decisions – yes.

But decisions that can be made because Jesus followers, people of His way, following His discipline are trained, just like the original disciples. So Jesus trusts us to be able make this kind of decision. ^{*3} As Jesus taught with authority and not as their scribes, according to 7:29, so the disciples are to be better scribes, but scribes nevertheless (so also 23:34). The good scribe or interpreter is one who both draws on tradition (scripture) **and** draws on contemporary experience as a parable of God’s reality in the world, thus on both old and new.

It is part of our discipleship that we examine ourselves and ask what it is in / with our faith that we need to throw out in order to be able to speak into the reality of God’s promises in our world? What is it in our life as a community here in St Johns that we need to throw out so we can really live God’s promises while knowing that we might not be the ones to see fulfilment? God in Christ says the promises are worth the hard work – **can we?** Amen