

**First Sunday after Trinity 2019 (23.06.19)**

**Genesis 24: 1 – 27; Mark 5: 21 – end**

I'm going to concentrate on the Old Testament lesson tonight. I'm sure that the story of Jairus' daughter in Mark chapter five is a very important piece of scripture and worthy of extensive and profound exposition by better preachers than I; but, let's face it, it's just not as good a yarn as the wooing of Rebekah in Genesis 24. Wasn't our Old Testament lesson this evening a cracker of a story? And if we take nothing else away from this evening, let it be this: this may be the Holy Bible; it may be God's Word; it may be revered as one of the principal ways in which the reality of God is revealed to us; but there's no need for us to be po-faced about it.

You've got to remember that before these stories were written down, they were passed down, in the oral tradition, through families. For that to work they've got to catch your attention and excite your

imagination. And there's no better way of doing that than having a good story with plenty of humour and a bit of sex.

If, when you heard this story, what came into your mind was something like a scene out of a Carry On film – with perhaps Terry Scott playing Abraham's servant, meant to be just carrying out a task on behalf of his employer, but his eyes are standing out on stalks and he's coming out all in a sweat as these dusky maidens come to the well; and he's trying to look like a cool boy racer, hoping they'll notice how many camels he's got (a sort of Old Testament equivalent to a 300 horsepower All Wheel Drive Jaguar) except he's getting too flustered by the sensual way they swing their hips as they carry their water jars to be remotely cool – if that's the sort of thing that comes to mind as you hear this story, then you're probably not getting it wrong: you're not being irreverent. That's the way this story is designed to operate.

And whilst it's operating in that way, it's telling us some really important things. In some ways this is a very secular story. There's nothing religious or spiritual about it. It's about getting a good wife; and the very worldly criteria for judging a good wife are *a)* proper genealogy, *b)* good looking, *c)* many camels and *d)* is she a virgin?<sup>1</sup> And yet there's an absolute, unwavering conviction that God is present and at work in this very every-day, very worldly activity of eyeing somebody up.

It's a reminder to us that there's more to faith than religion. If we are Christians, then everything we do is dedicated to God and God is involved in everything we do, not just the religious stuff, or the devotional stuff or the stuff that's explicitly spiritual. Being a Christian is just as much about the non-religious stuff we do Monday to Saturday as it about how we conduct ourselves in worship on a Sunday. If you are a Christian bricklayer, the walls you build are no

different to the walls any other bricklayer builds, but every wall you build is an act of worship. God is in the ordinary stuff of life.

And yet, whilst there is this unshakable conviction that God's hand is in it all, God doesn't actually do anything in this story. There's no direct action or intervention on the part of God. We don't get a great voice booming out of heaven when Rebekah appears saying "This is a prospective wife for Isaac with whom I am well pleased." It's only by reflecting on what's happened that can discern how God has been involved; and we can properly appreciate and give thanks for our blessings. So we need to become reflective people.

The phrase "Reflective Practitioner" is the buzz phrase of theological education at the moment. Last month I spent two days interviewing all the third year curates in the diocese at their Curacy Assessment Panel. What my two colleagues and I were looking for was evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann "Genesis" p.198

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that they engaged in theological reflection – we wanted to see a portfolio of reflections – but we also wanted them to demonstrate how they used those reflections, how they worked for them, to help them discern where God was in what they'd been up to. And then the week before last I went to St. Hild's College on the same site as the Community of the Resurrection and the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield. It's where our new curate Maxine has been training and I went to meet with the Principle for a bit of a handover between that phase of her ministerial training and the next phase for which I shall be responsible here at the Priory. And he was keen to demonstrate the different techniques of theological reflection to which the students had already been introduced.

Now in many ways, in fact in most ways, being an ordained Christian, a member of the clergy, is no different to being an un-ordained Christian. It's just that it's through the clergy in general, and perhaps in priests in particular, that the characteristics of being a

Christian are focused or crystallised, or perhaps we might say identified and made public. But all those characteristics are just as much there – in an unfocused, uncrystallised less publicly identified way – in all Christians. Ordination is a bit like a prism: light is just as present on both sides of the prism, but can only be seen as colour after it's gone through the prism.

And that means that if it's important for clergy to cultivate the disciplines of being reflective practitioners, it's just as important for us all. We live in a time – and I think this is distinctive of the particular time we're living in – where a great emphasis is placed on making things a good experience. Somebody was telling me recently about taking delivery of a new car – it was a 300 horsepower All Wheel Drive Jaguar as it happens – and they were telling me of the lengths the dealership had gone to in order to enhance and indeed dramatically build up the experience of handing over the keys to the point it

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became a theatrical spectacle. And we get questionnaires, don't we, asking us to give feedback on our shopping experience or whatever it may be. And the problem we face is that we can come to church in the same frame of mind, expecting a good experience, expecting something to happen that's spectacularly supernatural. Whereas we need to gather here humbling hoping that the time we spend together, in worship and attending on the Word of God, will serve to cultivate in us the unshakable conviction that God is present in everything we do Monday to Saturday, and the disposition to be able to reflect and discern his hand in it – and to recognise the ways we are blessed, no matter how many camels we have.

Amen.