

## **Fourth Sunday after Trinity (evening)**

### **Genesis 24: 1 – 27**

I love it when we get a good, long Old Testament passage at an evening service. Not just because I take sadistic pleasure out of making Kay read it, but because we get such good stories. I suspect I probably fall into the trap of many preachers, and usually preach on passages from the Gospels, to the exclusion of other parts of the Bible. And that's a shame, because passages like this evening's, the story about Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac, are too good to get overlooked.

In part that's because this story, like so many others in the Old Testament, is a cracking story – it had to be to survive. It had to capture people's imagination and command the affection required for it to be told and retold and handed down. And it does that by being full of quite earthy humour: it's all about the servant hanging round wells, eying up the women, showing off

his camels. There's nothing new under the sun. Next time you see some boy racer, sitting at the traffic lights, trying to impress with his Subaru Imprezza, just think of Genesis chapter 24 and Abraham's servant sitting round the well thinking to himself, "If she mentions my ten camels, I'll know that I'm in there!" And it couldn't get more salacious than that the one that did was a maiden "very fair to look upon." One highly respected, academic theological commentator has said "The blessings of heaven come packaged for earth!"<sup>1</sup>

And of course, at one level, it isn't only a good story but it is no more than a story. There's nothing religious about it. The servant does pray twice, in the middle and at the end. He asks God to grant him success; and he blesses God that he has been successful. But God doesn't actually *do* anything in this story. It's just an earthy story about getting an appropriate wife. The criteria are: proper genealogy,

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann [1982] Genesis John Knox Press (Atlanta)

many camels, a virgin and it's an added bonus if she's easy on the eye as well. And that may seem offensively sexist, but it's at that level that the story operates.

But it operates at a deeper level as well. It may not be a religious story, but it is a story about faith. It's a story about how living faith is experienced in those every-day, earthy matters of life. The whole adventure is held within a framework of an assumption of God's steadfast love. The key concept is that God is steadfast. It's a story that illustrates and proclaims God's providential care. And it's a story that promotes the spiritual discipline of reflective discernment.

The servant looks back, at the end of our passage, and acknowledges that he has been led by God. God has done nothing visible, but the servant can discern his guidance; and he blesses God for it. He believes that he has been led. And this is the same sort of being led by God that the psalmist speaks about in the Twenty Third Psalm: he leads me beside still waters; he

restores my soul./ He leads me in paths of righteousness; for his name's sake. It's a matter of a faithful conviction that God has been there; and it's only in retrospect, by seeing the pattern of things unfold, that that can be seen.

So the profound truth mined from this seam of good story telling is that the life of faith is about more than religious experiences. It's about more than seeking out religious thrills. It suggests that if we are seeking spectacular demonstrations of God's power, we may be looking in the wrong place. Praise God that miracles occur. This evening's Gospel reading is brimming full of them; and there are plenty who will give testimony to God's miraculous power today. But don't reduce God to the level of a performing seal in the circus, who has always got to be providing surprises for us. Trust the ordinariness to God as well; and be assured of his steadfast guidance and support.

Amen.