Genesis 29:14-35, 'The Deceiver is Deceived'

By Ian Olliver

Another Sunday, another step in our journey with Jacob.. I think we were hoping to discover an utterly inspirational human being who, with his great relationship with God paved the way for a great nation to be created.

What we seem to have found instead is something quite different… and todays story is no exception. Here we seem to have some horrible characters doing horrible things in a horrible way. It's perhaps no wonder that so many people start to read the Bible and think "If this is what the people of God are all about, then no thanks very much!"

We are going to look at this ancient story….. which in many ways is actually a very modern story. In ancient times marriages were usually arranged. They were there to stabilise the community, build alliances.. rarely did someone get to choose their partner or marry for love. This is a story which actually speaks more to our culture than the culture of those times. Anyhow, by the end I'm hoping and praying that God will have shown us something beautiful and inspirational. I think that is what he has shown me… Are you ready to have your preconceptions challenged and your minds blown? Ok let's dive in.

First a brief recap of the story so Far. Jacob and Esau were twin brothers. Esau – strong, hairy outdoorsy and athletic. Jacob quiet, nerdy, opportunistic and deceitful.

Jacob had traded his brothers birth right for a bowl of stew. Esau was hungry and not thinking straight. But what was said was said and what was done was done. Then, sometime later when his Dad was blind and near death Jacob had dressed up in his brothers clothes with goatskins attached to his hands and neck so that when Isaac reached out he would think he was giving his blessing to his older and favourite son Esau, when in fact it was Jacob who had those words spoken over him.

Esau was super angry and threatened to kill his brother so Jacob fled north to the house of his uncle Laban. On his way up Jacob had an encounter with God and a vision of a stairway leading to God's throne. That is where we got to last week.

This week we arrive with Jacob at the house of uncle Laban. Laban welcomes Jacob into his home and after a while offers Jacob a job and is happy to negotiate wages.

What would you like to be paid? asks Laban. A nice question to be asked!

Jacob is in no doubt as to what he wants. He has noticed Laban's younger daughter Rachel and- the Bible tells us - she is an absolute stunner. Physically beautiful, sexually attractive.. She is the face that would be front cover of shepherdess magazine…She is the wages he wants… He is instantly under her spell. Rachel is absolutely 100% his focus.

So how long to work for her hand in marriage? 2 months? 3 months? 6 months? Jacob – cunning scheming Jacob doesn't even attempt to negotiate. He's besotted…"I'll work 7 years" he blurts out.

Laban replies “Its better that I give her to you than some other man, stay here with me” Notice that Laban has not said “7 years for Rachel… that’s a deal” But Jacob is so infatuated with Rachel that he doesn’t even notice that Laban has been vague…he just assumes that it’s a yes.

And so Jacob starts work – eyes on the prize. He probably had a chart on the wall ticking off the 2492 days until Rachel day!

The months and years flew by…and by the time the 7 years were up Jacob was just beside himself with desire. He says “Give me my wife, My time is completed and I want to lie with her” OK, we get the picture! steady on now Jacob!!

They have a wedding feast, plenty of food, plenty of wine. Evening comes. The bride arrives veiled there is a short ceremony and Jacob carries his new wife off to the bedroom.

Morning comes, and Jacob gets the shock of his life. There is Leah lying next to him! Leah the older sister.. the one with weak eyes… whatever that means.. maybe cross-eyed, maybe bulging eyes… maybe lopsided eyes, but in any event there was nothing in Leah’s appearance that Jacob found attractive…. And I suppose the sad truth is that physically nobody found Leah attractive…The only way that Laban feels that he is going to be able to marry her off is if he does a switcheroo during the wedding ceremony knowing that Jacob is so focussed on the fact that finally Rachel is his that he cannot begin to comprehend that the reality would be any different.

Jacob storms over to Laban, absolutely livid “What is this that you have done to me? You have deceived me!” And even as the words leave his lips he remembers exactly those same words come out from the mouth of his brother 7 years before. He remembers how Isaac’s blood had run cold as he reached out,….. fumbling in the darkness only to discover that he had been touching and blessing the wrong brother.

And now he thinks of how his own blood had run cold as he had fumbled in the darkness only to discover that he had been touching and making love to the wrong sister!

I mean Karma isn’t a Christian concept… but wow. God clearly does do black humour and irony! How stupid does Jacob feel realising he has been duped by almost identical tactics to the ones he had used himself all those years ago.

But just hold on for a moment. What about poor Leah in all of this. She surely knew how this was likely to play out. Why would she allow herself to be put in this position?

We don’t know, but I can take a good guess. Leah fancied Jacob. She would know his story as the less favoured brother…and she would have identified with that. Perhaps felt sorry for him to begin with…. But then seen that his eyes and his heart were set on Rachel. Rachel who would have never been short of admirers. Rachel the beautiful one, Rachel the popular one, Rachel the one everyone talked about and all the boys fancied. How was Leah ever going to compete with her sister Rachel?

Ok so she didn't have the looks, but would Jacob be so shallow as not to notice the deep love and affection that Leah held him in? She would make Jacob a good wife…. She would make Jacob an excellent wife. She would make Jacob a better wife than Rachel ever would.

In that culture there was no better way to prove yourself as a good ,worthy and fabulous wife than by bearing children- especially sons. And Leah did just that- Come on Jacob- open your eyes and see what an amazing woman Leah is.. She has given you a son… Reuben…and then has given you another son… Simeon….and has given you a third Son….. Levi…… By any standard in that culture the woman who bears her husband 3 sons is the most treasured and beloved wife……and yet still Jacob is still having nothing of it. His heart is still only there for Rachel…. And Leah's heart is utterly broken… What more can she do? Nothing!

And then she has a fourth son. Something changes… It seems that Leah also has an encounter with God. Leah has done everything humanly possible to be loved….And God has noticed this… its as if God has met with Leah and said "You know what Leah. No-one notices you. Your husband doesn't love you. You have done everything you can to make this work. You do not deserve this…. But you know what… I notice you… I love you… I see that you are an amazing and loving and faithful wife… and I'm going to bless you. This fourth son that you are going to have… he is the one I will choose to bring my story of redemption to the whole world. You are not invisible… in fact you will become an inspiration and in 4000 years time your name will still be given to baby girls and your story will be told around the world…and even at Ross Baptist Church in England.

Now how do I work that out?

Well firstly look at Leah's much more positive response to the birth of her 4th son. She says "This time I will praise the Lord- and if you look carefully at the name Lord it is not the general name for God- Adonai God that created the world and is the usual name by which God is referred to. No. this is the special name, the intimate name Yahweh. The God who Jacob met in his vision, the God who Moses met at the bush.

Yes this is a terrible story with terrible characters. Jacob, the nerdy, deceitful unimpressive son of Isaac and Rebekah meets the unlovely and ignored and equally deceitful… but then faithful and dutiful woman Leah. And God takes these two damaged, broken and uninspiring humans and uses them as the raw material with which he will weave the narrative that leads to the redemption of the whole world.

In our age of superheroes and the strong and beautiful being the only people who are really worth anything. In the Marvel universe it would be Esau and Rachel all the way in the starring roles. Our God – the one true God is different. He chooses the unlovely and the also-rans to be his treasured possession and at the heart of his mission to save the world. No wonder that Christians are mis-understood by the dominant culture in the west today.

And we get confirmation of the truth of all this right at the end of Genesis, Jacob gets to bless all his sons… and this is what he says of the 4th child Judah chapter 49 verse 9

‘Judah, your brothers will praise you;
your hand will be on the neck of your enemies;
your father’s sons will bow down to you.
9 You are a lion’s cub, Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
like a lioness – who dares to rouse him?
10 The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
until he to whom it belongs shall come
and the obedience of the nations shall be his.
11 He will tether his donkey to a vine,
his colt to the choicest branch;
he will wash his garments in wine,
his robes in the blood of grapes.

We gather to the table, celebrating the true Lion of Judah, the one from whom the sceptre will never depart. Whose robes were soaked with his own blood symbolised here with the wine.

Let us pray.