Genesis 31:1-21, 'A Nation Conceived in Chaos and Jealousy'

By Ian Olliver

We pick the story of Jacob back up in chapter 31. But I must fill you in on all that has been going on since we last met with him.

If you remember Leah had just given birth to her fourth son Judah. It was a good place to end. Everything settled and Leah now at peace that she now knew that she was loved and had been vindicated by God…. But of course with real life…and every family soap opera…. Things never stay peaceful and settled for long.

Now it was Rachel's turn to become the jealous one. Having spent her life as the beautiful and popular one she could hardly bare to see her sister in the role of contented wife and mother with small children crawling all over the place, whilst she still had none.

So, rather than being grateful for what she did have and turning to prayer and supporting her sister, she instead takes matters into her own hands… well if God isn't giving me children Jacob, then why don't you sleep with my maidservant Bilhah, and we can build a family through her.

And Does Jacob as a god-fearing and righteous man say to her. Rachel.. be patient. I still love you. You must trust in God and pray and be happy for your sister. God might just be teaching us an important lesson here.

No.

Instead he says What a great idea. Of course I'll sleep with your maidservant and get her pregnant instead. And so Dan was born… and then Napthali.

And as she could see the advantage and Jacobs affections swinging in the direction of the Rachel camp so Leah suggests that Jacob also sleeps with *her* maidservant Zilpah and so Gad and Asher arrive.

And, if this hasn't already gone enough Jeremy Kyle, The next thing we find is Rachel trading her night in the bedroom with Jacob for Leah in exchange for a few mandrake roots. Echos of Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of stew, except that this time it is Rachel almost trading her right to give birth for a basket of veg. I mean bizarre- and so Leah falls pregnant again with Issachar and then Zebulun.

And then finally, after all these years of kafuffle, God grants what Jacob and Rachel have been longing for all these years a son of their own… and they give him the name Joseph.

And this, my friends is how the 12 tribes of Israel come into being. I mean how crazy and awkward is this! Yes this story is ancient, and it's really difficult to prove how accurate it is after all these centuries… But I do know that if I was going to invent a story to start a worldwide faith, then I'm sure I would have come up with something much more noble and heroic that this dog's dinner of an account. There is something so ludicrous and wrong and

ridiculous with all of this that surely for it to have stood the test of time in the way that it has, the only way that is possible is if God himself were the architect of the story. Don't you think?

Right in the heart of this dysfunctional family where wives and brothers are vying for love and attention, finally a child is born in whom they can all unite in venting their hatred and disappointments. But that is a story for another day.

In the here and now Jacob has a whole bunch of women to placate and hungry young mouths to feed. It's time to leave….Except that Laban has seen the incredible success that Jacob is enjoying as a farmer. Laban says "Please stay. I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you. Name your wages and I will pay them"

Here, finally, Jacob becomes savvy enough to outwit his uncle Laban. Instead of a fixed wage he takes flock options. Speckled and spotty sheep and spotty and speckled goats for Jacob. All regular sheep and goats to remain with Laban. Is that a deal?

Laban is delighted, and Jacob works out a method of ensuring that the speckled and spotty animals are the most healthy and fertile. Before long it becomes clear that Jacob is the Bill Gates of the farming world. His flocks increase at an incredible and unprecedented rate. Laban clearly sees the amazing ways that God is blessing Jacob, but at every turn Laban refuses to acknowledge God who is behind Jacob's success. Laban is happy to enjoy the material benefits of Jacob's faith, but never benefitted spiritually by knowing and worshipping Jacob's God.

I wonder if you know people who see the difference that faith has made in your life and yet stubbornly refuse to acknowledge it or refuse the offer of that same Spirit of God living in their own lives. It's frustrating, isn't it? But we can't change the hearts of other people, the only heart that we can make a material difference to is our own…and how we allow God to work within it.

Maybe there is someone who springs immediately to mind. Lets just take a moment and pray for them now.

As we enter chapter 31 it is clear that Jacob's prosperity has been such that Laban's sons realise that Jacob and his family need to leave. And, as we discover. God's generous provision for Jacob is the only thing which keeps Jacobs fractured family from disintegrating.

What also seems clear is that the bad behaviour of Jacob and his family has not been quite as bad as the behaviour of Laban and his family. Jacob brings his wives into the fields where his flocks are flourishing and he explains the situation to them. God has given Jacob a vision in which Jacob has clearly seen the deceit and exploitation inflicted upon him by his father in law.

It's as if God has tried every avenue to enable Laban to become part of this story and be included in the fantastic future that God has planned for Jacob and his family. But at every turn Laban only sees what might be in it for him in terms of material wealth. And now even

his daughters see Laban for the grasping materialist that he is. Even the wealth that he does have he seems somehow to have squandered. Rachel and Leah both know that Jacob has worked 7 years for both of them…and yet what has happened to all that money that Jacob earned for them over those years….. it has been used on who knows what… but the girls haven't seen anything of it.

I get the feeling that all the toxicity that there has been in all the relationships throughout Jacobs adult life might just have the nefarious influence of uncle Laban at its core. God needs to have Jacob out of there. Jacob has been there long enough. He has learned enough lessons and now he just needs to get out.

I say this because sometimes to discover what we might need to do in a bad relationship that we might find ourselves in. Absolutely patience and perseverance are good and important Christian principles and often we are called to do these things in challenging circumstances. But sometimes we just need to get out. If things become so difficult, so unpleasant, so dangerous we need to think carefully about whether it is right to keep on trying..or whether it is needful to get out- draw a line- move away and start over.

Jacob had learned to become a little more attentive to the moments when he encountered God and Jacob clearly heard in his vision that the time for reasoning and trying to placate and people please Laban was now over. He just needed to get out and return back to his home town.

Once he had fled from there and his brother Esau. Now it was time to flee back away from his Father-in Law. At the end of the passage we realise that he- as per usual – goes about this in the cowardly and opportunistic way that we have come to expect from Jacob….. they wait until Laban is off sheep shearing and then without note or explanation Jacob, his 4 wives, sons flocks and herds and they move out. To be honest I can't picture a quick getaway here!

Do they get away? Well that's for us to find out next week. But for today, what do we learn with all the ridiculous and terrible behaviour that has been going on by all sides. The indignant part of me thinks, what is God thinking here? Why is he bothering to pursue his promise with this weak minded, unprincipled devious shepherd. Why is God blessing all of Jacobs flocks. Why is he allowing this serial fathering head of a dysfunctional family to get blessings that he clearly just does not deserve.

Has God gone mad and lost the plot?

Could it be something about the act of obedience a generation before. When Abraham would not withhold his son, his only son whom he loved so that the blessing would be for him and his family. That the price had already been paid for the mistakes and disobedience of his children and that God's blessing would continue to rest on them.

Would that be OK?

Has God gone mad and lost the plot?

Could it be something about an even greater act of obedience forged in a garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives on a Thursday night that was followed through with a brutal crucifixion the following day. When God himself would not withhold his son, his only son whom he loved so that the blessing would be for me and my family, my family of believers around the world who have come to understand and accept something of the unfathomable grace of God poured out on flawed and unlovely and weak and occasionally stupid people like me and like you.

This is what grace is. A gift that we could never afford, given to us who would never deserve it, and given just because God Loves us so incredibly deeply.

Well if that is what love does… it makes God go mad and lose the plot because he loves me so much and so desperately wants to save me…. Well, That is exactly the mad kind of God that I want to preach and make known. I'm so grateful that that is ***exactly*** the true nature of the only true God. The God I get to praise and worship here on a Sunday and in my heart throughout the week.

The world is full of chaos and jealousy still. We all have shards of Jacobness within us which affect our personality and relationships. Never can we fix ourselves enough to become the noble saints fit for heaven that we know we should be. We deserve to be expunged, punished, forgotten about. Bu God chooses to believe something else about us. And that is the gift of grace we have been given.. The heart of our gospel, the heart of our faith, the heart of our God. Saved by an act of pure love.

All praise to his name. Amen