**21st April 2013**

**Genesis 25.19-34**

Richard Chartres the Bishop of London gave a very personal address at the funeral of Margaret Thatcher on Wednesday. He avoided the politics and stressed the personal – this was a death and a grief. But he also spoke from his own friendship with Lady Thatcher. He shared how she got a letter from a young boy early on in her time as Prime Minister. Nine year old David wrote to say, "Last night when we were saying prayers, my daddy said everyone has done wrong things except Jesus. I said I don't think you have done bad things because you are the Prime Minister. Am I right or is my daddy?"

The bishop of London said ‘Perhaps the most remarkable thing is that the PM replied in her own hand in a very straightforward letter which took the question seriously’.

"However good we try to be, Margaret Thatcher wrote, ‘we can never be as kind, gentle and wise as Jesus. There will be times when we do or say something we wish we hadn't done and we shall be sorry and try not to do it again…If you and I were to paint a picture, it wouldn't be as good as the picture of great artists. So our lives can't be as good as the life of Jesus."

The Bishop went on to say how she once gave a lecture in which she talked about her faith. She said that, "Christianity offers no easy solutions to political and economic issues. It teaches us that there is some evil in everyone and that it cannot be banished by sound policies and institutional reforms…We cannot achieve a compassionate society simply by passing new laws and appointing more staff to administer them."

She was very aware that there are prior dispositions which are needed to make market economics and democratic institutions function well: the habits of truth-telling, mutual sympathy, and the capacity to co-operate. These dispositions are incubated and given power by our relationships. In her words, "the basic ties of the family are at the heart of our society and are the very nursery of civic virtue". Such moral and spiritual capital is accumulated over generations but can be easily eroded.

Life is a struggle to make the right choices and to achieve liberation from dependence, whether material or psychological. This genuine independence is the essential pre-condition for living in an other-centred way, beyond ourselves. The word Margaret Thatcher used in the lecture was "interdependence".

She referred to the Christian doctrine, "that we are all members one of another, expressed in the concept of the Church on earth as the Body of Christ. From this we learn our interdependence and the great truth that we do not achieve happiness or salvation in isolation from each other but as members of Society."

We continue today to look at the formation of the people of God through the line of Abraham. Today’s passage from the book of Genesis describes the fierce rivalry between Esau and Jacob the grandsons of Abraham and the sons of Isaac. It describes the total dysfunction within their entire family and their lack of interdependence. This is the opposite of the type of family nurturing a civic virtue that Lady Thatcher hoped for.

Isaac, the son of Abraham, has found a wife, Rebecca. Rebecca is childless and Isaac appeals to God on her behalf and God heeded his prayers. But the happiness of motherhood was clouded by the agonies of carrying twins. Consulting a prophet she is told that ‘two nations are in your womb’. The ancient promises to Abraham are reaffirmed that he would be the father of many nations. However the twins will be divided – quarrelling from childhood. Then finally she is told that the older will be the servant of the younger.

The twins are born and the second emerges trying to catch the heel of the first. Their struggles inside the womb are all set to carry on outside. Sadly the conflict is aggravated by the parents’ partiality. They commit the most serious sin of parenthood – having favourites. Isaac is shown to be a man of appetite, and this causes him to favour his hunting son Esau, who brings him the game he enjoys. But Rebecca, the maternal activist, prefers her quiet, reserved son, Jacob, who is set to become a herdsman like his father and grandfather. So already the truth of the prophecy is beginning to be realised.

More evidence of its truth is shown by the red broth incident. Returning weary from the hunt, Esau begs his brother for a portion of the red stew he has prepared. Brotherly affection would surely demand that Jacob freely meet Esau’s needs. But with callous calculation, Jacob insists that Esau exchange his firstborn’s inheritance rights for the stew. In other words, he should surrender precious long term goods for the immediate appeasement of his hunger. Amazingly, Esau consents, and Jacob acquires the firstborn’s right of inheritance. Already the elder is becoming the servant of the younger.

Then there is the drama of Jacob cheating Esau out of his father’s blessing. The drama in chapter 27, is among the most gripping in Genesis. Will Isaac dislodge Jacob’s disguise as he blindly gropes over the goatskins draped around his neck. Will Esau arrive back from the hunt before Isaac has eaten the special stew and blessed Jacob? We wait to discover whether Rebecca and Jacob will get away with their daring ruse.

But our sense of moral and theological sense of propriety may be outraged by the suggestion that God’s intention to bless Jacob could, let alone should, be forwarded by such underhand tactics. The actions of Rebecca and Jacob are utterly discreditable and indefensible. But the writer of Genesis doesn’t just paint this story in black and white terms.

The story starts by remarking how Esau had married two Hittite wives, who made life miserable for Isaac and Rebecca. Loyalty to family tradition and the family tribe should have dictated that Esau didn’t marry a Hittitie. Esau by his choices was asking for trouble in the long run.

Esau’s marriage also reflects on Isaac’s neglect of duty. If Abraham had arranged his marriage why hadn’t he done the same

for Esau? Throughout Genesis Isaac is portrayed as a passive character. In the previous chapter his quite peaceable nature in avoiding confrontation with the Philistines was implicitly applauded, and he was rewarded by a reaffirmation of the promises and great prosperity. Here, however his virtues have become a vice; his quiet patience has become lethargy. Failing to find suitable wives for his sons his life has been made miserable by unsuitable daughters in law.

As a parent you come to realise that there’s a time to be passive and let things go – and there is a time to act and get involved – and it takes wisdom to know what to do in each situation.

But this experience has not taught Isaac to be less partisan, for on his deathbed he flouts convention and summons just Esau to receive his blessing, whereas it was customary for a dying man to call all his sons to his side to receive an appropriate blessing.

Deliberately, though, Isaac calls only Esau to receive his blessing, and he leaves out Jacob. The reason he gives for only calling Esau is that he makes a tasty stew. One cannot but be reminded of Esau how only a few years earlier had swapped his birthright for red broth.

Isaac and Esau are both alike in putting their appetite before principle, self indulgence before justice, immediate satisfaction before long term spiritual values.

Initially then, the blame for what follows lies with Isaac and Esau as well as with Jacob and Rebecca. In other words : they are a right lot – all of them! No one comes out of this story purer than pure. Mrs Thatcher is right no one is good – not like Jesus.

After dressing up as Esau, Jacob is given the total blessing and promised fertility of the land and the subjection of his brothers.

Jacob and Rebecca suffer for their deeds. Jacob has to flee from home to escape his brother’s wrath. Rebecca hopes that he will be away only for a few days but it lasts twenty years and she never sees her favourite son again. Jacob, the deceiver, is for his part cruelly deceived by his father in law Laban, who makes him marry the unlovely Leah as well as the beautiful Rachel. Jacob never accepts Leah nor her sons, and the bitter tensions between them would cloud the rest of his life. Like his mother Rebecca he spends most of his latter years mourning the loss of his favourite son Joseph. Jacob and Rebecca would end up paying dearly for their act of deception.

Historically the story of the conflict between Jacob and Esau doesn’t end with Genesis. Jacob and Esau are the forefathers of two nations Israel and Edom who were bitter rivals in the Old Testament period. And the age old conflict is not forgotten in the New Testament. The Book of Hebrews points to this story to draw points for the present. Its readers were Jewish Christians tempted to avoid persecution by reverting to Judaism. Like Esau, they were ready to swap long term blessing for immediate relief, so Hebrews warns ‘see to it that no one is immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal Hebrews sees Esau as a type of backslider or unbeliever who didn’t value his salvation and birthright.

Isaac and Esau put their appetites before principles, immediate satisfaction before long term plans and spiritual values. With so much concern about the environment, about food shortages, about alternative energy, we can only hope the world’s leaders put the long term care for this planet and its people, before short term comfort and prosperity – but there are Isaacs and Esaus in all of us.

In this church we are trying to invest for the future – but that always costs – it is always more tempting to just muddle along getting by in the short term. The development of the Parsonage and upper Halls we hope is an investment for the future that may open up so many exciting possibilities for the church and its witness and outreach to the community. At our church meeting next Sunday we will discuss some of this.

In our personal lives: do we identify ourselves at any points with this family tale? Have we experiences of sibling rivalry, of parental partisanship, lies and deception that lead to disastrous consequences. It would be no surprise if we did – for we are all far from perfect.

Paul uses the Esau story in his letter to the Romans to show how the Jews have failed to recognise Jesus as the Christ. He cites various examples from the Old Testament where God’s choice has nothing to do with human merit including the choice of Jacob over Esau (Romans 9.10-12). The fact that God was able to use people like Jacob to forward his purposes may shock us, but it should surely encourage us, too, for at times we fall as badly as he did. If God could use Jacob, God can graciously use us?

And the real scandal in this story is God. God has chosen Jacob. God has taken one who is low and despised and has overturned conventional power arrangements. In that age, and to a certain degree in our present age, the oldest had more standing and privilege than the youngest. Rights and privileges destined some to advantage and some to disadvantage. That world of privilege and denial is disrupted by the God of blessing who sides with the youngest, the one without the rights and the privileges, and thereby dares to call into question the status quo and the conventions of the day. Blessings will be arranged in a different way.

You see you may feel that you are not very privileged in this world. You may feel that life has been against you so far. You may feel that you are a loser, that you are second best. Well I’ve got news for you – God doesn’t see it that way. Blessings are arranged a different way in the kingdom of God. The first shall be last, the last shall be first; blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth; god chose what is low and despised in the world to overthrow the existing order (1 Cor 1.28).

Jacob is chosen! This is sign of God’s remarkable graciousness in the face of conventional definitions of reality and prosperity. Jacob is a scandal from the beginning. The powerful grace of God is a scandal. It upsets the way we would organize life around merit and privilege.

This story shows the bad points of all the members of this family. Not one of them is perfect. Each self-centredly seeks their own interest. Yet God can turn those vices into virtues.

Ultimately the story reasserts the grace of God. It is God’s mercy that is the ultimate ground of salvation.