

ST GEORGE PRESHUTE
10.00 am Parish Communion
11.30 am Matins
24th July 2011/Trinity 5

Genesis 29.15-28
Psalm 105.1-11, 45b
Romans 8.26-39
Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

I think that my favourite character in the whole of the Old Testament is Jacob. This was the patriarch who tried to be born before his brother Esau and so he gripped him by the heel and then as he grew up he became his mummy's favourite whilst his brother, the big hairy brute went off doing macho things like hunting and the like. Then we hear how scheming Jacob used something as simple as the lentil broth to supplant his brother and receive the first-born's blessing. This story is all wonderful knock-about stuff. We ought to be in stitches laughing at the sly manoeuvrings of tricky Jacob. He might have started out second best but he's going to get to the top. And then something rather odd happens in this hilarious tale. Jacob has high tailed it back to his mum's relations until the heat is off regarding the theft of the blessing, but, as we heard last week, on his way there he's had a vision of God at a place called Beth-el (house of God). And the vision contains God's promise that the great nation promised to Abraham and Isaac with people countless as the sands on the seashore is to come from Jacob. This has definitely brought a more serious note into the buffoonery.

But then the story switches into a love story. And we all like love stories don't we? Jacob arrives back at his mum's family and meets this

absolutely stunning girl called Rachel. Not only is she a cracker but she's a shepherdess the chosen profession of the people of Israel. Of course, Jacob shows her what a big strong lad he is by removing the stone cover from the well to water the sheep. And we can read between the lines that Rachel and Jacob were instantly "an item". You can fill in the gaps in your imagination. The only problem is persuading Rachel's dad Laban (Jacob's uncle) that this is a good match. Now comes the problem.

Laban, you see, is just as much a tricky character as Jacob. In fact they're well matched in dastardly dealings and sharp practice. But fortunately Jacob has God on his side. I particularly like the story about Jacob tending Laban's flocks. His uncle said that when the new lambs were born, the white ones and the black ones he would retain but any speckled ones Jacob could keep. As it is today, speckled sheep are a bit uncommon, so Laban wasn't doing his nephew any favours. But hey! Jacob employs a little bit of sympathetic magic to get the right coloured ewes on heat just when the right coloured rams come along and hey presto Jacob's got more sheep than Laban. You see, you can't fight against God's chosen one.

And today's story is just another instance of the same rivalry between Laban and Jacob. There's the lovely Rachel and she's his for seven years free labour. But don't you just love that bit that says, "and it seemed just like a few days because of the love he had for her". Aaaaah! But come the wedding celebrations Laban has one more trick up his sleeve. You might wonder how it was possible for Jacob to get fobbed off with the

elder sister Leah. By the way that translation is wrong, it's not her "eyes were lovely" but "her eyes were dull"! Leah was a plain Jane but she turned out to be a good breeder. Anyway, the reason Jacob didn't realise who he was marrying was that, of course, the bride was veiled and I mean rather like the veils you see in Iran or Egypt today – head to toe with just a slit for the eyes. Leah no doubt wanted a man and so you can imagine the encouragement of both wine and the woman on the wedding night for the normal consummation to take place and then in the morning "It was Leah!" Once again the story is high comedy. Our trickster has been well and truly tricked. Another seven years hard labour for Rachel is the price. In the sequel you might like to read for yourselves how Jacob got his revenge.

Now, you might be thinking that all this comedy and duplicity is hardly the sort of thing we should be hearing about in church on a Sunday morning. Like all texts in the Bible, it's always useful to reflect on who's writing this stuff and what interests are being served. Well, it's obvious that Jacob is a hero (even if a dubious one) because he founded the nation of Israel; his sons founded the twelve tribes. And the people of Israel were nomadic herdsman, who after a nice lamb stew at night settled down in their tents to hear tales of their famous ancestor who tricked the Edomites (Esau's descendants) and then taught the Arameans (aka Laban) a lesson or two. They lapped it up and laughed like drains. Such a shame that *we* don't laugh about it in church. But the main point, that is more to our edification perhaps, is the theology of the tale. Jacob

is the most unlikely hero and father of the nation but *he's been chosen by God*. God chooses the most unlikely people to be his followers – if you need confirmation of this fact just look around – but nevertheless even the slipperiest of customers can be chosen by God.

And this is a lesson that we should all learn time after time. *We don't see with God's eyes*. Our thoughts are not his thoughts. Our prejudices are not his. And it seems to me that this is why we should humble ourselves before the judgement of God. Someone once said, “There will be a few surprises when/if we get to heaven”. For the kingdom of God as we heard in the Gospel is surprising and hidden and mysterious. Just like the way yeast works is hidden and mysterious or how a tiny tiny seed can actually grow to quite a bush or how treasures and pearls turn up in people's attics to this day. It's just the same sort of thing. Don't think you know how God's thinking 'cos the moment you think you have God taped *he's escaped*. And that's the same when we make judgements about other people. Oh yes we do, I know we shouldn't, but we do. What the fishermen think is a good fish might not be how God sees it. And will we be on the evil or the righteous side I wonder?

So thank God that, as St Paul tells us, we have no righteousness of our own – not a leg to stand on *but, but, but*, God's righteousness never let's us down. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Answer no one. God's grace is unbelievable. He saves the most *unlikely* people. If Jacob can become righteous in God's sight, there's hope for us all.

1,189 Revd Ian Cooper

ST GEORGE PRESHUTE

10.00 am Iona Service

10th July 2011

Matthew 19.16-30

You may have noticed these almost 5 years that I've served amongst you here in Preshute that I have a set of stoles which were specially embroidered for me. They have two crosses at each end. One is the Martin Cross from Iona and the other the Joshua Cross from my home town of Isleworth. Iona, Isleworth and Ian all begin with the letter "I" and I like to think there is a symmetry about these connections.

When I was about to go to university in the 1970s to study Theology, I gave up working in the Accountancy profession and for one summer I went to work for the Iona Community as the "wee tenter" or campsite manager. For two months I imbibed the magic of this windswept isle and met one or two friends who have stuck with me for a lifetime.

Most groups visit the island for a week and follow a familiar pattern set down by the Community. On Monday a group goes on pilgrimage around the isle visiting the beach where Columba and his monks first landed in their coracles, the religious sites marked by the famous Celtic crosses and ending at the Benedictine monastery church. To give you an idea of what it is like here are some images.

SHOW PRESENTATION

On Wednesday evening a very special service happens in the church. It is called An Act of Commitment Service and this is the service we are using for our worship today. By the middle of their week pilgrims often feel the need to affirm their Christian belief and their wish to “follow Jesus”. The service gives people the opportunity to witness to their faith by various demonstrations both physical and prayerful and Sarah will be explaining these to us in a minute or so. Of course, being Scotland there is often a lengthy sermon preached on a biblical text which ought to fire you to get up and witness to Christ, but I will spare you that. Let me just say that the reading that we heard and the songs that we have sung and will sing have just this theme of “Come, follow me” The rich young man who questioned Jesus about gaining eternal life found that his wealth got in the way of his being a true disciple. Even the twelve that Jesus had chosen found that the going was tough and often unrewarding with only Jesus’ promise of treasures in heaven to look forward to. Once again they were told of the great reversal that is at the root of so many of our Lord’s sayings – if you want to be first you will be last and it is the last who will be first. It’s the hard lesson for Christians spelt out in the following parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard.

But to return to Iona and the service. The demonstrations of commitment are available but not compulsory; they are there for those who find them useful. But what I would urge all of you to do later is participate in

receiving a “Word of Jesus” This is where you come and kneel in front of the altar, rather like at Communion and you receive a short Word of Jesus. This is given personally to you and is yours to treasure and ponder and see where it fits in your own personal faith in Jesus. For me this was the most moving part of the whole week’s pilgrimage. Sure, we had fun at the ceilidhs and Scottish country dances. We were moved at the Ecumenical Eucharist service but for me it was receiving my Word of Jesus that still sticks with me almost 40 years on. I hope that you will avail yourself of this ministry and I hope that you will enjoy the rest of our worship this morning and maybe one day travel to the Isle of Iona yourself.

ST GEORGE PRESHUTE
11.30 am Holy Baptism
10th July 2011
Trinity 3

Genesis 25.19-34
Psalm 119.105-112
Romans 8.1-11
Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

Welcome

Very special welcome to Harry Anthony Fraser and Ashley Louis
Whatley

Also a warm welcome to their parents and supporters.

Please no photographs or videos during the service but there will be an opportunity to take pictures at the end.

Talk

The story of the Sower always puzzled me in two respects. Why was it that Jesus, who was forced to preach from a boat because there were so many crowds, didn't tell one of those stories about catching fish? And secondly what a rubbish sower that guy was just spreading the seed all over the place rather than concentrating on the good part of his allotment. However, I have learnt that in ancient Palestine apparently this style of 'broadcasting' was the way things were done in this rather haphazard way. It certainly provided Jesus with an image to get his point across.

And in a week when broadcasting and the media and how its controlled has rarely been out of the headlines, it might be appropriate to look for some meaning in Jesus' story in relation to Ashley and Harry becoming members of the church today. It seems to me that becoming a Christian is not just about how much you understand about God and the Bible and so on. Neither does it matter much what size and shape you are – all seeds just have potential and mostly look the same. Rather it is how you deal with what life throws at you that is important. And because Ashley and Harry are young and vulnerable they are going to have to rely primarily on their parents, and perhaps their godparents too, to be protected from evil, be steered away from shallowness and to be steadfast when life gets tough. As they grow they will need help and encouragement to persevere

in these ways and it is, I can tell you, a real joy to see your children grow into well rounded people who produce abundantly in their turn. I hope that you will always be proud of how Harry and Ashley turn out.

But above all the encouragement and skilled baby care that will be lavished upon them, I'm sure that they will need one thing in abundance and it's the opposite of the sort of broadcasting scandal that we've heard about this week. For it is not those who gain an advantage over others by fair means or foul that we ought to become. On the contrary it is those who are respectful of others, loving, caring, and always looking to serve without personal gain who will be doing God's will.

ST GEORGE PRESHUTE
10.00 am Parish Communion
19th June 2011
Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 40.12-17, 27-31
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 13.11-13
Matthew 28.16-20

It's no secret that when vicars think about their preaching rotas they normally mark down Trinity Sunday for the curate or some other minister (Sadly Sarah is on a Training Weekend and she preached last Sunday anyway.) Normally a desperate vicar will think that anybody but themselves will do. For Trinity Sunday poses the problem of trying to explain the inexplicable. Many of us would have preferred it if no-one

had suggested that it would be a good idea to have a Sunday when one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith could be brought into the spotlight and acknowledged for the great achievement that it seemed to those medieval innovators. However, the three in one and one in three concept is like a black hole in space; the more you try to shed light on its meaning or even its history the more light gets sucked into the abyss. The problem is that the doctrine is a metaphor, a mystery, a grasping at what the whole event of Jesus' life, death and resurrection actually means. Whilst the revelation of God in Jesus' life is not disputed among Christians – we all believe Jesus is Son of God – but *how* that works out, the economy of the godhead, the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit and the consequent delineation of what it means to be fully God and fully human, just continues to elude my understanding despite my study of theologians who outline it. Like much of Christian belief, we need to be more reticent about what God thinks and admit that, by contrast, our human thinking about God is partial and incomplete; as St Paul famously said we look through a glass darkly.

Now, please don't get me wrong. Nothing I have said, I hope, implies disbelief on my part. Indeed my faith in Jesus Christ is undiminished; I truly believe him to be divine, the human face of God. My problem is what to do with this belief on Trinity Sunday. Today I want not to stretch the limits of language in a tortuous definition of something I believe ultimately to be indescribable but to take the more positive aspect, I

hope, of suggesting that our best response is worship. For I believe that it is not philosophy that nurtures faith, rather it is what Christians *do* that matters. When we encounter Jesus in whatever way in our lives, we realise that we are not signing up to an academic theory. By whatever means we come to believe that Jesus is God's son, the consequence is twofold: to *live* the gospel that he preached and to *worship* the Father to whom he prayed.

Quite a lot of sermons speak about discipleship and taking up your cross and following our Lord. I guess that you have heard less about worship and why we come here. To me, worship is at the centre of my life because of my inability to articulate my relationship with God in any other way. The gracious reaching out of the Father to each one of us, a Father who knows us and loves us, who forgives our sins and guides us in our lives is something that is so precious to me, and I guess to you too, that I am agog at how unworthy I am to have thus been called. My worship is a tentative exercise of a relationship with my Lord that I know I don't deserve. And yet he calls me to himself again and again.

And in the Eucharist service supremely I am reminded of Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross. In a simple symbolic meal the self-giving of God comes flooding through again and again. It is particularly in the words that we use in our worship – our liturgy – that so many of these reminders are present. I know that repetition can make our minds

cloud over, but in those words, there is the possibility of reaching out to that mystery and receiving his promise in bread and wine. That is what we experience and respond to again and again in the Eucharistic Prayer when we hear the voice of our Lord afresh, “This is my body, this is my blood, do this in memory of me.”

But words are not the only adjunct to worship. The music we sing, the decorations we see, the sounds we hear all provide a context for our worship of God. Some of the greatest hymns can capture in their poetry much more than we can think or conceive.

Charles Wesley’s *O Thou who camest from above* is a case in point:

O thou who camest from above

The fire celestial to impart

Kindle the flame of sacred love

On the mean altar of my heart

And the last verse

Ready for all thy perfect will.

My acts of faith and love repeat

Till death thy endless mercies seal

And make the sacrifice complete.

And finally silence. We pray many words, we sing our hymns but more and more it is the absence of sound in which we hear the still small voice of calm. Jesus used to go to lonely places to pray and many find solace in

his example. I am constantly amazed at how much praying goes on in any parish without the need for clergy to promote it. This makes me glad; simply because it is all our prayers that ensure we are a faithful church here in Preshute. I am also very grateful to those who pray for me – I need them too. I am also grateful to those who come and pray with me not just on Sundays but on weekdays too. Those who pray need not necessarily fill the time with words; those who explore silence come to appreciate it is not a time of emptiness but a time of fulfilling.

I wonder whether I might have just done what I said at the beginning was extremely difficult and told you about the Trinity.