

Genesis 24: 34-38; 42-49& 59; Romans 7: 15-21a; Matthew 11: 16-29 & 25 to end

The texts we have for today are much read pieces and certainly in years gone by (if perhaps less so nowadays) would have become well known by those who have heard them. There is the story of Abraham's quest to find a wife for his son Isaac; the acknowledgment of the power of sin that Paul describes as a tussle for himself and for all Christians; and the two parts of the Gospel reading which begin with a description, a parable really, of children who cannot agree on the games they should play and end with a reflection on divine revelation and an invitation to those who are worn down and defeated, to come to Jesus to find solace and support.

In the OT reading we have the story of the encounter of Rebekah with the faithful servant sent by Abraham from Canaan, the land where he now dwells, to search for a bride from amongst his own family, recognised as God's people, in what was Abraham's homeland. It is a heart-warming story of faith and faithfulness on the part of both the man who sees the beautiful Rebekah and asks her if she will come back to Canaan with him to be the bride of Isaac, and of Rebekah herself. Rebekah's external beauty is noted, but we find that her beauty is as much internal as external, for she is given the choice by Abraham's servant and by her father and brother to accept or refuse the invitation. Her internal beauty then is in her discernment of and obedience to God's will and also in her courage and faith in setting out on an unknown journey, so that God's promise to continue to redeem Israel will be fulfilled.

Rebekah chooses the way of God by her own free will just as Mary so much later chooses to accept the way for Christ to enter the world. Rebekah through her own loving character forges a permanent place in Isaac's heart and in very human terms we are told that her love and kindness greatly reduce the grief for Isaac of his mother, Sarah's, death. It is a relationship that enables God's work to be established and accomplished among the Israelites in their homelands and in their times of exile. It is a human relationship: it has its moments of drama, even of deceit and sin. Her twin sons Esau and Jacob are later dragged apart partly by Rebekah's scheming for Jacob to be anointed as Isaac's heir, partly by Jacob's own ambition. Despite Jacob being described as a quiet, holy man compared to his active, boisterous and often godless, brother, it is the one who knows God, who nonetheless commits the sin against Esau. Despite the deceit, we must remember that Rebekah and Isaac's union was ordained and chosen by God. Jacob too though sinful, ultimately receives God's blessing and it is God who changes Jacob's name to Israel.

In the **reading from Romans**, generations on from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, we nonetheless see there is still a dichotomy between God's plan and human behaviour: between two things. This time it is between the way the new followers of Christ including Paul himself have accepted and understood God's will, and their struggle to live their lives by that will. It is not a battle between brothers, not a contest for political power in Israel, but a battle within each person, which we all experience: a battle to serve God as he wishes, or to use our own powers to live in the world. The motives that drive us may, even for the best and most earnest of us, become more about our own powers and wishes than about truly accepting and following the path God lays out for us. It is not by our own efforts, but only by accepting the grace and love of God as our driving force that we can move into the loving relationship with God that we are **PTO**

offered through Christ. As Paul tells us however, it is very easy (and very human) to step away from the path of grace. This path which God wants us to follow is not necessarily a straight one, nor an easy one, not one we can always find on our own, but there are ways of finding the support we need to travel along it and that brings us to the **Gospel reading**.

In the first part of this reading, Jesus is rebuking his friends and other followers as a generation who cannot see or accept truth when it's laid out in front of them. Both Jesus and his cousin John have come to reveal truths to the people, but like the children who won't dance to merry tunes, or won't weep when they play sad ones, the onlookers refuse to join in at all, with either the sternness of John, or the compassion of Jesus. They use rules and laws meant to make them at one with God, to block the ways for those who bring God's Word into the world. We begin to see that it is only those who are like real infants in their faith, who are open to seeing and hearing the new possibilities, who can accept the new tunes. They don't claim exclusive knowledge, they don't have education, or position, or power, but with those signs of human success swept away, they are much more open to letting God in on his terms, not theirs. It is those who are not contaminated by the way the world judges success who will more easily welcome the true love and compassion that Christ brings to them. It is those who are weary and burdened, who know that alone they cannot function and that the sin they carry every day is too heavy to shift away on their own.

And so, Jesus is promising, not lecturing or blaming when we have as the climax of our readings, some of the best known and most beautiful words in the Bible:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

How often have we each heard those words? How often have you and I remembered them, perhaps in the nick of time, when we have been doubtful, distressed, angry, despairing, or just very tired and unable to move forward? Jesus says: “Come to me in your weariness, your anxiety, your fear, your lack of self-worth. Learn from me, the one who comes to serve, not to be served. I am gentle and compassionate and in my love you will find rest.” In accepting this offer we are not passive, but active, like Rebekah we make the choice; like Paul we strive to be part of God's plan, but we don't have to lead or to be in charge, we can safely walk with Christ, because we are yoked to him and we are invited to work with him, but not separated from him.

I think sometimes that we can see visible reminders of those words in the fields around us, especially in the older pastures here. The ridge-and-furrow ploughing that gives fields a corrugated look under the grass. Not so visible now perhaps as it once was, but still to be seen around in this region. Long ridges with furrows between them (butts and reans). The more sinuous they are usually the older they are: often medieval – and often in a reverse S shape. They are like this because they were ploughed by teams of oxen yoked together. I was told by those, like my own grandparents, who once worked with ox teams, that they are wonderful animals together. They worked yoked in pairs, or sometimes in 3's and 4's and by tradition they drew a plough with a mould board that pushed the soil up into ridges. They are slow, methodical beasts, very strong and very biddable, very gentle, but they need a big space to **(next page)**

turn around in, so when they were used the ploughman would begin the turn as soon as they set off – hence the S shaped ploughing which allowed them to turn at the end of a field. That word yoked – tied together, but not burdening each other. If you know what I mean by these field shapes, if you see them as you travel, let them remind you of the word “yoked.” They have endured because they were made by creatures willingly tied together and able to encourage each other.

In our yoking of ourselves to Christ, we may plough metaphorical furrows and ridges, but we plough the field in which we find the fruit of Christ and we find it not by our own efforts, not even by our own failures, but by the incredible presence of God’s Son, who is willing to be lovingly yoked with each one of us. Look out for those fields and if you see them, may they remind you of the offer of the gentle yoke of Christ to be placed on your shoulders and of the joyful company he offers.

Amen