

Sermon for Evensong on the Second Sunday after Trinity,
30th June 2019

Genesis 27:1-40, Mark 6:1-6 - see

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=428750231> - *A Mess of Pottage*

'A mess of pottage'. A mess of pottage. No, we're not playing 'Twenty Questions', if that brings back any memories. It's not 'animal, vegetable or mineral', but I am thinking of Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac, who was himself the son of Abraham.

Isaac and his wife Rebecca had twin boys after they had been married for twenty years, when Isaac was 60 years old (Gen. 25:26). The boys were called, one, 'Esau', which means 'covering' - because he was hairy all over, and a redhead - and his twin brother, who was born immediately afterwards, with his hand grasping Esau's heel, was called 'Jacob', which means, 'he caught him by the heel'.

The story that you will have thought of, when I used the words 'mess of pottage', is what comes next in the Book of Genesis. We hear that the boys have grown up; that Esau had become an outdoorsman, skilful in hunting, whereas Jacob has led a sedentary life and 'stayed among the tents,' or, stayed at home.

Isaac preferred Esau, because he kept him supplied with his favourite venison; but Rebecca, the Mum, favoured Jacob. The famous story is that one day, Jacob had prepared a pot of soup, red lentil soup, when Esau came in from the country, tired out. He asked whether he could have some of the soup which Jacob had made. Jacob said that he wouldn't give him any until Esau swore to sell him his rights as the first-born, his birthright. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and the lentil soup, which he ate and drank: and then, off he

went. Jacob had got him to give away his birthright for a 'mess of pottage', which is what, in 1600, stood for a bowl of soup.

A mess of pottage. Actually, you won't find the phrase 'mess of pottage' in any Bible: not even in the Authorised Version - at least, not in the text itself. But you will find it at the end of the introduction, from 'The Translators to the Reader', at the beginning of the Authorised Version of the Bible, (but not in every edition, just the fully annotated ones).

But that's not the story we had in our lesson tonight. That was the second story about Jacob and Esau, about how Jacob disguised himself as Esau by putting on a furry cloak and making himself appear to be 'an hairy man' like his brother Esau, so duping their father, who by that stage was very old. He was 60 when they were born, so now that they were grown up, he must have been at least 85, I would have thought. Isaac had gone blind, so he couldn't be sure, by looking, which twin was which. He relied on feeling them, knowing that one of them was hairy and the other was a smooth townie.

So Jacob ended up having Esau's birthright, as the older child, and he got their father to give him his blessing as well. Obviously that didn't make for the best relations between the brothers.

Well, I don't propose to go into more and more detail about the ins and outs of the story in Genesis, but to take it instead as a cue to look at the whole idea of a birthright.

The world of the Bible into which Jesus came, 2,500 years ago, had a social order which is very alien from the one which we have today. Society was patriarchal. Men were in

charge. There were free men and slaves. In families, the first-born inherited much the greater part of their father's wealth. It was his 'birthright'. (And it was he rather than she, because inheritance was by male heirs only).

Jesus came into that world and indeed there's no criticism, either in the Old Testament or in the New, of that setup, on the basis that slavery, for example, is wrong, or that a male-dominated society is not fair; or that the eldest son should inherit the lion's share of his father's fortune.

You will remember the old system among the English aristocracy, according to which the eldest son inherited the father's title and estates; the second son went into the army and the third son, into the Church. Never mind whether anybody was particularly suited for these rôles, or, in the case of the third son, whether he even believed in God. It was just the way things were. It depended on how you were born, on accidents of birth. Birthright.

Think of the parable of the Prodigal Son. It was the younger son who took his share of the property - obviously it was an early instance of inheritance tax planning. The father made it a lifetime gift rather than making the Prodigal Son wait for his father to die off and then have him inherit his share after tax.

We aren't told whether the younger son got as much as the older son, or would have got as much as the elder son, because the elder son didn't take his share at that point. He was happy to wait. But that was, in general terms, the way things worked under the Roman Empire and much earlier indeed, in early Israel (Luke 15:11).

When we get to St Paul's letters, being a Christian doesn't seem to have made him change his attitude towards the social order of the time. So in Ephesians chapter 6, after saying that children should obey their parents, St Paul goes on to exhort slaves to 'obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, single-mindedly as serving Christ'.

He does say that masters must treat their slaves decently as well. But there's nothing about slavery being wrong in itself. But today we do acknowledge that slavery is wrong. We are shocked to learn that slavery still exists.

The Church of England has launched the Good Car Wash app, so you can check your favourite place, to see whether it is a place where modern slavery is taking place. Is it just too cheap? And there are various other things to look out for. I've tested our favourite car wash in Leatherhead against the criteria in the Good Car Wash app, and I can tell you that they emerge with flying colours.

But, apparently, hand car washes are a type of business where the poor and vulnerable can be terribly exploited; so much so, as to amount actually to slavery.

We don't have much time for primogeniture, the birthright of the eldest son, these days. Our society has changed. I can remember when I was little that I had an uncle who, unknown to me, used to give my younger brother and me different presents at Christmas. I got five bob and my poor brother got half a crown. (That's 25p and 12.5p, for those of you who are not familiar with real money). But I never knew, because my folks always surreptitiously opened the envelopes and evened things up.) My old-fashioned uncle still believed that there was a birthright belonging to the eldest son.

I think we would all agree that nowadays the right of primogeniture is completely passé, and nobody would support it any more in a civilised society. On the face of things, the idea of primogeniture isn't compatible with the ideas that we are made in the image of God and that we should love our neighbours as ourselves; in other words, we don't love ourselves in different ways, unequally, so we should love our neighbours equally.

So actually, in the Jewish-Christian tradition, there are already the reasons why primogeniture is not consistent with our religious belief. But I want to suggest to you, for discussion at least, that although we would all agree that the right of the first-born, that Esau was diddled out of twice, effectively, by Jacob, is no real right, and shouldn't stand, because we are all equal in the sight of God.

Another way of looking at Esau's birthright - or anyone's birthright - is that it is an accident of birth. Esau had his birthright, by virtue of the fact that he was the first-born. It was a complete accident from his point of view. He just happened to be the elder son, by a few minutes - indeed, in the process of being born, he dragged his brother out after him, as they were twins.

But look - although quaint stories about Jacob and Esau and 'messes of pottage' are really just that, these days, quaint stories, accidents of birth actually seem to be capable of doing a lot of mischief.

Just because I was born in England in 1951, that puts me in a much better position than somebody who was born in Syria in, say, 1987. Or, the comparison could be with someone who was born in Afghanistan five years ago;

Or someone who was born 23 months ago, in El Salvador: who ended up drowned on the banks of the Rio Grande, with her father, trying to cross into the United States.

What is the difference between someone on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande and someone on the Texan side? What difference should it make where you are born?

In one sense it is enormously important if you were born in Syria, or Afghanistan, and people were threatening to 'blow your house up' unless you signed up with Daesh or the Taliban: you will take enormous risks in order to find a safe place. But does that make you worth any less, in the eyes of God, than somebody who was born in Cobham?

Why are we inclined to think of people who have escaped such terrible suffering as 'migrants', immigrants, economic refugees, rather than our neighbours; poor people, who need us to be Good Samaritans. I wonder if, just as primogeniture has fallen out of favour, eventually the nationalism and racism in our society, which have grown so much since the Brexit vote, will wither away in the face of our Christian belief, once we have properly focussed.

We may see the truth about our birthright, or lack of it, 'through a glass, darkly'. But let us pray that it will be very soon in plain sight, and that we will recognise our neighbours, and love them, wherever they were born.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant

