Sermon for Evensong on the Third Sunday after Trinity, 7th July 2019

Genesis 29:1-20 - and following; Mark 6:7-29 (see http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=429430740) - Weddings

This week's Bible lessons are both to some extent about marrying; marrying the wrong cousin by mistake, if you can believe that, or marrying one's brother's wife: some rather odd-sounding stories from up to 3,000 years ago.

First of all Jacob - you remember, Jacob had stolen his brother Esau's birthright, or cheated him out of it, in return for a bowl of soup, a 'mess of pottage'; well, Jacob got duped into marrying his girlfriend's sister by mistake: then Herod, who had somehow managed to marry his brother's wife Herodias, and Herodias had taken against John the Baptist because John had pointed out that what Herod had done was immoral if not illegal. But he did it because he could, because he was a king.

Jacob was looking for a wife, and somehow the daughters of Laban, his uncle, got mixed up and he accidentally went to bed with the wrong cousin. He had wanted to marry Rachel, but for some reason the girls' father, Laban, brought along Leah, Rachel's elder sister, and Jacob slept with her by mistake.

Perhaps it was an elaborate way in which Laban, the father, could force Jacob to work for him for a long time, in order finally to be able to marry the girl whom he loved, that is, Rachel.

The contrast between these stories and how we 'do' marriages today could not be more striking. As some of you will know, three weeks ago my younger daughter Alice was married to her beloved, Nick, in a beautiful church in Devon, just outside Axminster. So marriage and the mechanism of marriage is pretty fresh in my mind at the moment.

So far as I know, although Nick may have espied Alice across a crowded room and been attracted to her - which I think is very likely, knowing how beautiful she is - he didn't immediately come to see me with a request that I should in some way arrange for him to consummate a marriage with Alice without in any way consulting her first. But that's apparently what Jacob did with Laban.

In the case of Jacob, poor Leah ended up in bed with him, in such a way that it looks as though neither she nor her sister Rachel had much say in what was going on. It almost looks as though what was happening might even, in certain circumstances, if it had happened these days, have been regarded as rape.

Where Herod and Herodias were concerned, it seems that Herodias was quite happy to be married to Herod, and she resented anyone pointing out that her second marriage was, in effect, adulterous or bigamous.

Herod is portrayed as being caught on the horns of a dilemma, torn between wanting to honour his rash promise to Herodias' daughter Salome, to give her whatever she wanted, up to half his kingdom, as a reward for her wonderful dancing, the rash promise on the one side, and his own affection for, and respect for, John the Baptist on the other.

He had nothing against John the Baptist. Indeed we are told that Herod liked to listen to him; but when Herodias put Salome up to demanding John the Baptist's head, as her reward for winning the Old Testament equivalent of 'Strictly Come Dancing', Herod was too weak to say that that was not one of the things which he had intended when he made her the prize offer.

As a lawyer, it occurs to me that surely he could have argued that there was an implied term in his offer, namely that she could have

whatever she wanted - so long as it was lawful. And surely, gratuitously killing John the Baptist was not lawful. It was murder.

Herod showed the same kind of weakness when Jesus was on trial. (See Luke 23:6-12). Pilate had found nothing wrong in what Jesus had done, but Herod was not prepared to say that the Jews were wrong. And so, in both John the Baptist and Jesus himself's cases, partly through Herod's weakness, good and innocent men lost their lives.

I'm not sure that either of these stories, of Jacob with Rachel and Leah, Herodias with Herod and his brother, are actually there to instruct or enlighten us in any way. They are really just background. So far as the story of Jacob is concerned, of course it goes on to show that perhaps there was a divine retribution for Jacob's having spurned Leah, because Leah conceived and had a son, whereas Rachel was childless, (at least initially). There were some dubious manoeuvres involving slave girls, and it becomes apparent that Jacob was actually treating both sisters as his wives, and having sex with both of them. The whole thing is very wooden, very mechanical. There is a mention of love, but the love seems to be equated with whether or not children have resulted from the various couplings.

It's a world away from the romantic love that we hope our children, and indeed that we can enjoy or have enjoyed in our marriages.

We know that Jesus' teaching on marriage is still quite a long way away from our current practice. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says that if a man 'looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matt. 5:27-28).

In St Mark's Gospel, chapter 10, Jesus was teaching about the Jewish law relating to divorce, that, according to the law of Mo-

ses, a man could just send his wife away and it was enough in order to divorce her just to give her a note of dismissal, to confirm that she was divorced. But Jesus says that marriage is for life; that when a man and a woman come together in marriage, they become 'one flesh'. They are no longer two individuals, they are one: 'what God has joined together, man must not separate'.

Those of course are the words that we hear in the marriage service today; but sadly of course, just as with other commandments of Jesus, as we are human beings, we find that sometimes we are just not able to keep to his commandments. Divorces do happen, with all the sadness that they bring.

But I would also suggest that perhaps one lesson that we can learn from the story of Jacob and the story of the death of John the Baptist is that, in both cases, they involve people trespassing against Jesus' great 'new commandment', to love your neighbour as yourself. What did poor Leah feel like, when she was rudely dumped on Jacob - and then spurned? What did either of the girls feel when they were being treated just as things, just as child-producing machines, property, property of men, who could deal with them without any regard for their feelings or desires?

We are told that Jacob didn't love Leah: but did Rachel love Jacob? Was she happy that Jacob chased her when he was already married to her sister? In those days it didn't matter. Nobody bothered to ask.

Similarly with Herod and his brother, what did Herod's brother feel about Herod taking his wife away? We are told that Herodias loved Herod: but even so, it had all the things wrong with it that any divorce caused by infidelity has.

Looking around at everyone here tonight, I can imagine, in the nicest way, that for most of us this sermon and these Bible stories

are pretty much archive material in our lives. Not current, burning issues. But many of us are parents, and for many of our children keeping their marriages together and, indeed, getting married in a loving way, are real, live issues. We need to support our children.

Let us pray that whatever we and our children do, we do it not like Jacob or Herodias, because of lust or jealousy, but because of real love: the sort of love that we often have in the marriage service, from St Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13 - 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love (or as the AV puts it, charity)…'

Let us remember, 'Faith, hope and love… But the greatest of these is love.'

Amen.

Hugh Bryant