

Brotherly Love

Genesis 27-34

19th Sunday in Pentecost

3rd October 2010

Isn't it strange the things that come to light later in your life that you didn't truly understand at the time they took place? Things that happened in your childhood or teenage years and you didn't realise their significance until much later. In conversation with my oldest sister in recent times, I discovered how unhappy she was in our growing years that I had been given the opportunity to learn to drive before she did. I had assumed at the time – naively as it turns out – that my sister wasn't really interested in driving. As I look back, I think to myself, how that must have hurt. But I didn't realise it at the time.

That must be one of the most difficult experiences in life. Dealing with a situation where a younger sibling in the family is given some opportunity, or some recognition, or some favoured treatment that the older one feels is theirs by right.

I don't know if you read the story reported in the papers and on TV over the past few days about the outcome of the leadership contest of the Labour Party in Britain.¹ Out of the 6 contestants, two of the leading candidates were brothers. Sons of a prominent political family. David Miliband and his younger brother, Ed. Both in their forties. Right from the beginning of the race, as soon as then Prime Minister Gordon Brown resigned after defeat in the May election, it was assumed that David, the older brother, was the heir apparent. Not only was he the more accomplished, articulate and urbane of the two brothers but he had served longer in government and had occupied one of the highest posts in the land as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

In first three stages of the leadership election, last weekend, David was constantly in front. Until, that is, the very last gasp, in the fourth round, when his younger brother, Ed, pipped him at the post, winning by a mere wafer thin 1.3% of the vote. In defeat, David was very magnanimous towards his younger brother, congratulating him warmly on his victory. But, oh, how that must have hurt – and must continue to hurt – being denied the highest elected post in the land that you felt for so long was your right. To lose to any of the other candidates would have been one thing but to lose to your younger brother. How upsetting! It would be just like the Williams sisters meeting only once in their tennis careers and the younger Serena beating the older Venus without the likelihood of a rematch.

The archetypal story of the older sibling being displaced by the younger is, of course, to be found in that passage we read today from Genesis about the birth of Esau and Jacob, the twin sons of Isaac and grandsons of Abraham – boys who grew up so differently from each

other with almost nothing in common.² Esau, the firstborn and the older of the twins, developed into a rugged man of action and a hunter, who loved the outdoors whereas Jacob, the younger one, was quieter, more introspective, a stay-at-home fellow, his mother's favourite. You could almost say there was a kind of "Mary and Martha" difference between the two.³

As they grew up, the strangest of things happened. One day, Esau, came in from his day's hunting and was absolutely famished. He immediately espied the delicious-looking bean soup that Jacob was cooking on the fire and asked if he could have some. Jacob readily agreed but said that he wanted something in return. And it was not just one of the animals that Esau had killed that day. Not just his favourite cloak to keep him warm in winter. Not just some long-coveted trophy from one of his hunting expeditions. No. In exchange for the bowl of soup, Jacob wanted nothing less than his brother's rights as the first-born son. A request to which Esau, amazingly, and if somewhat naively, acceded.⁴

After that, things went from bad to worse between the two brothers because, later, Jacob, the younger one, with his mother's help, managed to trick his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that was meant to go to the older son, Esau. And the deception all had to do with eyesight and hair. From the moment of the twin's birth, one of the defining physical features between the two boys was that Esau had a lot of bodily hair whereas Jacob had none. As Jacob says in the King James Version, "Esau, my brother, is a hairy man, but I am a smooth man."⁵

With this knowledge in mind, Jacob placed a sheep skin over his shoulders and carried some of his favourite food to his father, Isaac, who was by now an old man and practically blind. When Isaac touched his son Jacob's arms, feeling the hair that covered them, he thought that he was Esau, the older one, and so gave him the blessing intended for the older son.⁶ Of course, when Esau found out about this he was livid and furiously beseeched his father to give him the blessing that was his right. But his father said that, according to custom, once the blessing was given it could not be revoked nor re-directed.⁷

And so Esau was left out in the cold, feeling hurt and angry, deceived twice by his brother, betrayed by his mother, abandoned and rejected by his father. All through no fault of his own other than being the victim of his own naive and gullible nature.

Now, there is surprising twist at the end of this story – and remember this is quite a long story occupying chapters 25-33 of the Book of Genesis which, of course,

I know you will want to miss coffee time after the service so you can rush home and read it! – the surprising twist is that, contrary to expectations, Esau and Jacob are reconciled. After Jacob returns to Canaan from an extensive time in Haran (which is modern South East Turkey) he decides to put things right with his brother, Esau. So he arranges to meet him and when he does, he brings him gifts, then bows down before him seven times asking for his forgiveness. Finally, they throw their arms around each other and, in tears, they embrace and kiss.⁸ A truly amazing end to one of the most conflicted relationships in the whole of the Bible.

How would you or I feel if this happened to us? If a younger sibling deceived us, hurt us, destroyed our hopes and dreams, robbed us of an inheritance that was our birthright? Surely, we would be dreadfully upset! Surely, it would take us a long, long, time to get over this! Surely, we would not be able to look at our sibling ever again without feelings of intense hatred! Surely, we would carry a grudge that almost certainly we would take to our graves! And, surely, the very possibility of forgiveness is one that we could not entertain. Because it would mean, would it not, that we are displaying weakness, implying that our sibling could again take advantage of us whenever he or she wanted. Surely forgiveness in such situations – and in other situations involving people apart from family members – would be quite unthinkable.

Yet, on the other hand, we are well aware that, though forgiving others may be one of the most difficult things we are called to do as Christians, we know we must do it. No matter the cost. No matter how long it takes. And this is not just to satisfy some archaic religious requirements. But to meet the demands of Jesus to forgive seventy times seven and thus align ourselves with God's will and purpose for our lives.

Also we know we have to forgive – to forgive family members as well as others in our lives, friends, co-workers as well as fellow Christians – if we are going to find true freedom in life. If we are going to find freedom from all the hurts, resentments and grudges that entrap us and keep us from finding true peace and contentment.

When Bill Clinton first met former South African President Nelson Mandela some years back, he had a question on his mind, “When you were released from prison, Mr. Mandela, I woke my daughter, Chelsea, at three o'clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic event. But as you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gates of the prison, I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as on your face at that time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I know today.”

Mandela answered, “As I walked across the courtyard that day I hated [my apartheid enemies] for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner

voice saying to me, ‘Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to give you freedom from captivity, only to turn you into their prisoner!’”⁹

Real freedom only comes from the truly forgiving spirit. Nelson Mandela has known this for a long time. The Christian Church has known it for much longer still. Hopefully, as Christians today, we too will come to know this eternal truth. That we can only really be free, happy and contented when we are willing to forgive.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, let's remember that, in many ways, this is the Sacrament of Forgiveness in which we are participating. As we take the bread and wine of communion, let us recall just how greatly God has forgiven us in Christ. And so let us pledge to become more willing to relay this forgiveness to others who have wronged us at some time or another in our lives.

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Labour Party Leadership Election 2010, *Wikipedia*
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_Party_\(UK\)_leadership_election_2010](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_Party_(UK)_leadership_election_2010)

² Genesis 25:27-34

³ Luke 10:38-42

⁴ Genesis 25:29 ff

⁵ Genesis 27:11

⁶ Genesis 27:18 ff

⁷ Genesis 27:30

⁸ Genesis 33:1 ff

⁹ King Duncan, “Set free through forgiveness”,
www.eSermons.com, 2005, Quotation edited.