

PENTECOST VIII 26 July 2020 Proper 12
A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White
at St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

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

Search for the Lord ... Seek his face. [Psalm 105.4]

The autumn that I entered middle school, I received a privilege: on Friday nights (and only on Friday nights) I could stay up past 10.00 and watch the Johnny Carson Show at 10.30. (This was in suburban Chicago: our 11.00 pm news came on at 10.00.) My parents did not watch all that much television, but they did watch Jack Parr and then his successor Johnny Carson, although my father never cared much about the opening monologues and preferred the interviews with the guests. Therefore the monologue gave him a chance to dash out for a small pizza (then a novelty in the suburbs) which the three of us happily nibbled during the interviews.

And these were often exceptionally good. Politicians, writers, actors, and singers shared the stage with Carson only, and the conversations lasted longer than they do now. I remember one with Lucille Ball (she ended up interviewing him), and I remember especially well one with the comedian Buddy Hackett. He was a Jew, and he took his faith seriously even though he could be hilariously irreverent, and that evening Carson challenged him on this. Hackett looked at him quizzically and then cited a maxim of the old rabbis --'Whoever makes the Scriptures laugh is twice blessed'.

I have never forgotten that. 'Whoever makes the Scriptures laugh is twice blessed.' And as our lectionary, the readings assigned to be read Sunday by Sunday, invites us deeper and deeper into the stories of Abraham's grandson, Isaac's son Jacob, we probably need to pay attention, among other things, to the raucous humor, the laughter in the tales.

For, in Yiddish, Jacob is a gonif --a scoundrel, a crook. God loves Jacob, and Jacob is a gonif. Last week we heard about his dream of angels ascending and descending on the place where he sleeps as though that patch of ground is the gate of Heaven; and God tells him that it is his descendants that shall inhabit this holy land. And, he has just left home to flee to his mother Rebecca's brother Laban, whom they hope will protect him from his brother Esau's wrath.

Esau is the elder of Isaac's and Rebecca's twin sons, although Jacob emerged from Rebecca's womb clutching ferociously on Esau's heel: so, the two brothers are rivals. Esau is not very bright, and Jacob has wrangled Esau's birth right as the first born by persuading Esau to sell it to him in exchange for a bowl of especially fragrant stew that he has

made. After that, Jacob and Rebecca have tricked the blind and dying Isaac by dressing up Jacob in animals' pelts so that he feels and smells like Esau, and they have been able to persuade Isaac to give the patriarchal blessing intended for the luckless Esau to Jacob. Esau is enraged and wants to kill Jacob, and so Jacob flees to Laban.

If all of this sounds like a particularly crazed soap opera, the writers of the story have managed to get our attentions with an entertaining tale that stays with us and, as we think back on it, invites us to think about it more and more and more.

Today we hear that Jacob has finally arrived where Laban lives, and Laban greets him with the news that he does not expect Jacob to work for him without compensation (even though Jacob has not said that he is looking for employment). Laban has two daughters for whom he wants to find husbands, and he notices that Jacob has already taken a liking to the beautiful Rachel, the younger of the two. And so Laban suggests that Jacob work for seven years and then he may marry Rachel. At the end of the seven years, Laban holds a great and drunken wedding feast; and because he knows that Jacob will be carried away by all of this, he arranges to have Rachel's sister Leah take Rachel's place in the nuptial tent.

The translation that we have just heard says that Rachel is 'graceful and beautiful' and that Leah has 'lovely' eyes, but as far back as the earliest Christian writers the usual translation of the word is that Leah's eyes are 'weak'. She may be obviously blind ...? She may be cross-eyed ...? Her eyes may be of different colors ...? We really do not know, but Laban clearly feels that he needs to trick someone into marrying her, and in the morning he excuses himself by explaining that the elder daughter really needs to be married first. And, he suggests that Jacob work another seven years and then he can marry Rachel, too.

It is a grim story about the status of women at that time, and it is also about other things. Jacob does seem to receive punishment for his treacheries to Esau --years of hard work and a marriage that he never wanted (perhaps Leah gets this, too: it is unclear)-- and we need also to notice that even though Jacob is a gonif, God still insists that his descendants are to receive the Land of Promise, that his and not Esau's children are to be the Holy People. The prophecies to Abraham and Isaac will be fulfilled through Jacob even though his scheming is an appalling comedy --a harebrained comedy-- and all of it invites us to ponder, to wonder with perplexity, Why Jacob with all his flaws ...? Why Jacob ...?

And the parables of the Kingdom that today we hear Jesus tell beg similar questions. A mustard bush is an invasive weed that most farmers would tear out of their sown fields, and yet for Jesus it is a symbol of the Kingdom that is coming. The man who goes treasure hunting in someone else's field and then, having found something of great value, hides it

again and surreptitiously sets out to acquire the property without disclosing the treasure it contains. This ... scoundrel ... Jesus says is the one who recognizes the Kingdom, and the farmer who tears up the mustard plant is blind to it.

You see, it goes from the Hebrew Scriptures through the teachings of Jesus and onward Keep looking, keep reflecting on what you hear and see, keep alert, and keep wondering Never pre-judge, and be prepared for surprises. Search for the Lord, continually seek his face, and be open

When the Kingdom --the fullness of God's presence in this world-- draws near we may be surprised by who it is who draws our attention to it. It may not be those through whom we think God should choose to work. It may be someone like Jacob, it may be what we usually dismiss as a weed, it may be a long-forgotten comedian on late night television

And, it is hard, often impossible, to laugh with the Scriptures, with what the Scriptures seem to reveal. And yet It is part of the mystery with which we need to live, in which we are called to hope

Just search for the Lord ..., continually seek his face. Amen.