

Two-way spiritual stem-cell transplant

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost +7A – 16-7-23 – Genesis 25 19-34 Romans 8 1-11

No condemnation for those in Christ Jesus – two-way spiritual stem-cell transplant

We get a confronting entrée to our scriptures this morning. During this Pentecost season, we're looking at Romans particularly, but we've also been tracking with the story of the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs – Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac and his wife Rebecca, and today, their twin boys, Jacob and Esau. This was the family through whom God promised all families of earth would be blessed. This glorious promise from God was Esau's birthright: he should bear this blessing to all subsequent history. Yet he gave it all away for a bowl of red lentil stew and some bread. And Jacob's dealing with this stolen birthright was hardly more edifying.

Esau had a case of the 'hangries', and Jacob was a tad more selfish than is desirable in a biblical patriarch. They serve as compelling case studies in how not to treat God's blessings. Poor old God – that great vision of all families of the Earth being blessed – how do you recover with drop-kicks like them in the saddle? The attitude we see in Jacob and Esau today is weakness, temptation, proneness to sin – a 'me-first-now' attitude – a choice for alienation from God and neighbour. We might call it the human condition. But these were the grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah, for heaven's sake! How could the rot have set in so soon? Weak, selfish, Godless.

Paul uses a technical term to name this human condition – flesh / *sarx*. We've heard the word ten times in this morning's

Romans reading. It doesn't mean our bodies. There's another word he uses for that: *soma* / body. When Paul uses the word *sarx* / *flesh*, he's naming the selfish, thoughtless attitude we saw in Jacob and Esau; the same shadow-side of human nature that afflicts the world now with all its catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences. *Sarx* is a word from which we get the word *sarcophagus* – which is appropriate as the thoughtless, selfish proneness to sin (alienation from God and each other) does lead to death.

But don't despair. We heard Paul first announce in 3.21-22 – *the righteousness of God has been disclosed, ... ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ*. Today he expounds this more fully and joyfully in chapter 8.¹⁻² *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus – the Spirit leads to life, the life of flesh leads to death. Flesh and Spirit; the choices we hear named often in today's passage.*

If we think of ourselves as descendants of Jacob and Esau for a moment – with the petty, selfish values they bequeathed to posterity – their self-seeking characters have been apparently fused onto our spiritual DNA – what hope could there be? Plenty! This claim of Paul's – *The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free* – announces that something like a spiritual stem-cell transplant has taken place to heal those who are in Christ. And Paul describes this as being something like a two-way transplant; our DNA / stem cells into Jesus, and his into us. ² *The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free* from this curse of an inheritance. But how?

In v. 3, Paul describes what's happened. Jesus takes on our condition in place of his. ³ *God ... sends his own Son in the*

likeness of sinful flesh (in our likeness), and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh (specifically, the flesh he took on). He looks like us – embodies our likeness – that of people with self-centred, thoughtless minds and hearts. But Jesus the human never wavers from a life of compassionate, selfless, tough love. And on the Cross, as a real human, he takes the full consequence of human selfish, thoughtless, Godlessness (sarx/flesh). And he takes its power with him to the grave, where it belongs.

In v. 4, Paul says Jesus did this ⁴ *so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* Jesus offers us the way of the Spirit and life in place of the way of the flesh and death. A gift we receive not by works, but by faith. It's all his work; his alone. When we walk in the faith of Jesus, when his Spirit takes up residence in us, the goodness and faithfulness of Jesus is somehow reckoned to us as righteousness by God. The way to death is replaced by the way to life. This choice of Spirit or flesh – life or death – peace with God or alienation – is the subject of the rest of today's passage. Jesus takes our death into himself, buries it, and in return offers us his risen life.

This rings true for me because of what I see Jesus doing throughout the Gospels. Paul didn't have the Gospels – his letters all predate them. But we do have them, and they illustrate in story what Paul has discerned and proclaimed. I remember particularly the story where Jesus is at dinner with Simon the Pharisee. A so-called 'sinful woman' comes and washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair and anoints them with costly perfume, kissing his feet all the while. Everyone else is scandalised that Jesus lets such a woman touch him. Jesus takes her shame from her and in return, gives her his honour. Luke 7.36f

For me, Paul is writing of just such an exchange between Jesus

and me; between Jesus and you. Paul is right to declare what he does: *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Thanks be to God! Amen.