

Family membership, open to all

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost—30 July 2017
Revd Martin Johnson

Genesis 29.15-28; Psalm 105.1-11; Romans 8.26-39; Matthew 13.44-58

Before I begin, I would like to show you my Australian Citizenship Certificate. Here it is signed by the Hon Bob Hawke. I'm going send around a clipboard for you to sign to say that you are an Australian Citizen and a card-carrying member, with me, of this tribe! Failure to meet this requirement will preclude your attendance here at St Philip's in the future. Let's pretend just for a moment that I am being completely serious! Imagine how you would feel. Hang on to that thought!

Margaret Attwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, has gained some fame in recent times because it has been made into a miniseries. In this tale of post-apocalyptic, dystopian madness set in a place known as Gilead, the younger women are taken to the 'Rachel and Leah Centre' which is bit like a human hatchery. I am yet to read the novel, but clearly Margaret is portraying some nightmarish return to the days when our ancient scriptures were written, days when anything would be done to ensure the continuation of the tribe—blessed are they that see their children's children, so writes the Psalmist.

Both Jesus and Paul were Jewish, descendants of the *twelve* tribes. 'I am of the tribe of Benjamin' Paul tells us in Philippians, while Jesus we are told in Matthew and Luke, stems from the House of Judah. Indeed he is the Lion of Judah in the Book of Revelation. Ultimately, they are both Hebrews, through Jacob the son of Isaac, who became Israel.

It is the *same* Jacob who, rather cunningly, managed to persuade his brother Esau to forfeit his birthright and then tricked his father Isaac into blessing him, thereby gaining the family inheritance; *he* has himself now been tricked. Jacob had fallen for Rachel and worked for her father Laban for seven years on the understanding that she would then be his wife. But after seven years' toil and a great celebration he wakes up married to her older and less desirable sister, Leah. There begins the story of Israel's line, primarily through Leah and Rachel.

These two remarkable women mothered the Jewish nation. But the story of manipulation and deceit which marked their family, continued as a rift in the lives of their descendants. Think of the rivalry between Joseph—Rachel's child (and Jacob's favourite—he gave him the technicolour dreamcoat) and his brothers, who were primarily Leah's children.

It was Moses, Leah's descendant, who redeemed the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt, but only Joshua—Moses's disciple and Rachel's descendant—who was able to lead the nation into the Promised Land. The rule of King Saul (descendant of Rachel) was cut short by King David (Leah's descendant) through whom a dynasty would be established. But the schism again resurfaced with the constant strife and divisiveness between the various kings of Israel and the Davidic dynasty. This is the tribal world of Jesus and Paul.

When I spoke to someone about all this during the week they suggested that they would rather like to do away with the Old Testament altogether and sometimes, yes, I feel the same, and this is not new thinking! In the mid-second century, a scholar called Marcion suggested a canon that contained a version of Luke's gospel and St Paul and some other writing and not much else. But the fact is that, unless we have understood the world of the Hebrew family, the tribalism with its struggles, division, rivalry, deception, then we will not understand or appreciate the extraordinary claims and the radical newness of the thinking of Jesus and Paul.

Today we conclude a course of readings on the parables. Jesus asks his disciples ‘Have you understood all this?’ ‘Yes’ they answer! And he says to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ The extraordinary claims of Jesus and Paul are that this old family is now made new. We cannot do away with the story and neither should we. Our calling is to remind this scriptural tradition in our day. Our bold claims of diversity and acceptance must find their foundations here. In Jesus’ day, the Kingdom Parables spoke of God’s love to all in ways that few could even begin to comprehend. The tribalism that was so much a part of life of Biblical times was to be reminded. It was for good reason that Jesus said to his disciples ‘do you understand?’ Of course they said yes! The *random* sowing of seeds, the *living together*—wheat and weeds, the net of God’s grace thrown over *us all*. This is so new as to be beyond imagination, they might have said yes ... but I wonder what they were thinking?

The merchant who has searched for years for the kingdom could very well be likened to those who have searched for a millennium and more and finally at last have found that great treasure—as against the recently arrived who have stumbled quite accidentally across it, the Jews and the gentiles. But it makes no difference, the kingdom is this renewed, reminded family. Paul says to the Romans: ‘And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.’ This is the language of the Jewish tradition speaking of God’s favours to Israel. But for Paul they are now God’s favours to all and he goes on: For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a *large family*.

In the reminding of the old in both Jesus and in Paul there is a radical welcome for all, and an understanding of the history of the family that influenced their world, should help us understand the newness of their message and set the context for our radical welcoming for this family of ours. But—yes there’s always a ‘but’—there is also the imperative to repent, to change. There is the calling to be deep soil, there is the calling not to be a weed or a dodgy fish. But as Paul reminds us and as Jesus showed us, this has nothing to do with us as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, or indeed whatever tribal or other divisions we like to create. Think how you felt when I demanded that you be of my tribe: outrage! Now turn that around and imagine how those of sat at the feet of Jesus and Paul felt when they were told that suddenly membership of this family was open to all!

Amen.