

THE POWER OF A DREAM

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Genesis 28:1-19

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So often the church seems to get it wrong!

Galileo and his predecessor, Copernicus, are examples. Their progressive observations and their ground-breaking theories in the field of astronomy unsettled the ecclesiastical authorities. In an effort to preserve its dominance and prestige, the church opposed, even persecuted these renaissance scientists only to make a public apology some 350 years later in 1992 when Pope John Paul II formally rectified the Church's condemnation of their work.

Then for centuries discrimination between races was legitimised by an interpretation of the Bible suggesting differing racial types, cultural distinctions and linguistic variations were ordained by God as a form of punishment because of humankind's sinfulness. This scenario took shape most clearly in the form of Apartheid and anti-semitism.

Meanwhile slavery was often justified by sincere Christians because of what they referred to as the "curse of Ham". In the Old Testament story of Noah we read that Noah's son, Ham, sees his father naked. Because of this all the descendants of Ham are cursed for this shameful misdemeanour. Moreover, the descendants of Ham were popularly believed to be the dark races of the world. Hence the justification for slavery as people of dark skin were considered to be inherently inferior.

It took the tireless efforts of the Christian parliamentarian, William Wilberforce, and other passionate 19th century evangelicals to change this.

Now, today, this may all seem a little odd, even absurd. However, a recent investigation by Julia Baird suggests some parts of the church are getting it terribly wrong again.

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This particularly concerns the abuse of women in the context of domestic relationships.

Baird's investigations claim abuse is most rife among men in Australia who are actually sporadic church attenders in the evangelical Christian tradition. It is suggested simplistic, uninformed interpretations of the Bible are the problem.

The so called "male headship" debate comes into play here. For, as we know, Paul writes to the Christian community in ancient Ephesus with these words:

"Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church...." (Ephesians 5":22-23).

We also read in the First Letter of Timothy:

"Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

Now, these verses present us with a challenge and they have, sadly, been commandeered as a means of "permission giving" to those who abuse. These controversial words from the New Testament - words that should never be lifted carelessly out of their ancient context - are being used by some as a means of holding women captive to enduring domestic abuse. And, sadly, this obscene and very damaging action takes place effectively in the name of God.

Here women say they are constantly reminded their duty is to obey their husband's every command. Here, women's lives are controlled. Women live in submission to their husband's will. And when this fails, women are led to believe that it's their fault, that they have failed in their Christian duty to be a good wife.

Now this may seem quite alarming, even troubling. It may even touch a raw nerve.

For, some observers claim the general concept of "male headship" within the church creates a noxious environment where women become more vulnerable, where agendas to dominate women are effectively condoned. And while this is never the intention of the scriptures - indeed, the scriptures are offered to us as a means to an abundant life - male dominance is both promoted and legitimized.

The point I am making here is that people often bring their own agendas to God's word. People allow their particular fears, uncertainties, insecurities, passions, ambitions and intentions form and shape the way they read scripture, understand the Christian faith and how they relate to God and to others.

Hence, superficial, literal approaches to scripture provide a convenient means for some to reinforce and support unhealthy attitudes towards women. Narrow, simplistic ways of reading the Bible can cultivate less than proper actions. And, friends, such things should not be tolerated because they actually speak against the spirit of the Gospel which clearly proclaims freedom, grace, mercy and peace.

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Now, if there was ever a character who could play his own hand at just about everything, and in doing so manipulate the truth and ride rough-shod over most people, it was the Old Testament character, Jacob.

As the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, Jacob abused family protocols. He subverted ancestral traditions by usurping his elder brother's birthright and seizing it for himself. Jacob did so by exploiting the vulnerability of others, by playing with the truth and by appropriating that which did not belong to him for his particular benefit and prosperity.

Our reading today from Genesis builds on Jacob's conniving exploits as he incurs the wrath of his disenfranchised brother, Esau, and has to, therefore, flee his hometown, Beer Sheba. Jacob heads to Haran in the north and about halfway along the track he comes to a place where he rests for the night.

Jacob's journey is a sad one as he traces his grandfather's journey in reverse. Made as a journey of faith, Abraham's well-known sojourn from Haran to Canaan serves as an inspiration to people of many traditions. But for Jacob, his journey is nothing of the sort.

This is a journey of expediency. This is a journey undertaken in the cause of preserving the life of a scoundrel who manipulates the truth, champions "fake news" and plays the system. Indeed, this is the journey of one who is anything but faithful.

And what happens that evening? Jacob has a dream. Jacob dreams of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. Such a dream has inspired many an artist and I have included a picture here of a huge aluminium structure created by David McCracken. It's a piece submitted to Bondi's famous "Sculptures by the Sea" exhibition in Sydney and it is referred to as a "stairway to heaven".



Here God stands close by Jacob and the important thing to note is that this dream comes completely out of the blue. Jacob never anticipates it and, as God speaks, Jacob is a passive observer. Jacob is a receptive onlooker. There is no conniving going on here. Jacob has no room and, indeed, no grounds, to play out his exploits.

For, you see, God catches Jacob unaware as a promise is made. This promise affirms God's faithfulness. It underwrites God's commitment to Jacob's ancestral line.

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Friends what we witness in this story is a major u-turn for Jacob. No longer is Jacob actively plotting or manipulating situations to serve his own interest. No longer is Jacob twisting the truth to suit his own ends. Rather, here in a place that is to be known as “Beth-EL” (“House of God”), Jacob is stopped firmly in his tracks. Jacob is given a lesson by God that focusses on the gifts God offers rather than the acquisitions, the conquests and the fabrications Jacob, himself, devises.



In this, the focus is on God’s initiative. In this, the pivot is God’s self-disclosure. In this the linchpin is God’s incredible generosity.

Jacob as a “go-getter”, Jacob as a soothsayer, Jacob as a mover and a shaker, Jacob as a high flyer gets no traction here. For, it’s not a case of what agenda Jacob brings to the scene that’s important. It’s not a matter of whether Jacob shapes, forms, twists or manipulates the truth that is of concern to us.

Rather, what matters, what’s important, is that God comes to Jacob. God reaches out to Jacob - and God does so in the most unexpected of circumstances with a promise, and with an assurance, that has incredible implications for Jacob’s future.

It is also interesting to note that here in this passage Jacob turns from referring to “your God” to making the claim of “my God”.

For it is when one stops to contemplate God, it is when one lets go of the handles and takes the pressure of the accelerator, it is when one learns not only to talk and to do but, rather, to listen and to receive, that God begins to speak in a most profound, intimate and personal way.

Friends, Jacob got it all wrong as he allowed his own sense of self-importance drive his outlook on life. Jacob was far off-beam with his craving for success, wealth and prestige. And God put a stop to that.

God did so in the manner of an unexpected, powerful dream. Here Jacob’s world changed through no effort of his own. Rather, it changed through the presence of a generous, loving, kind and merciful God who stopped this conniving little usurper completely in his tracks!

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There is no doubt the church will continue to make mistakes. Huge issues encircle us. National security, as highlighted with government plans to institute a Homeland “super ministry”, causes us to think about what it actually means to be good international citizens.

Appropriate responses to climate change, given we are commissioned to be good stewards of the creation, is another. And there are ongoing debates concerning marriage equality, euthanasia and, of course, the rights of everyone, female and male, to live a safe, fulfilling life free of intimidation, harassment and abuse.

Jacob’s dream is a story for each and every one of us. For here, we are challenged to stop, to let go our personal agendas, to cast aside our fears, uncertainties and anxieties, and to dump our deep-set biases by opening ourselves to the incredible presence of God.

Here we are invited to “let go and to let God”. In other words, we are encouraged to pause, to listen and to receive. For Christian faith is not about what we bring to it. Following Jesus is not determined by what we do or what we think should be done. Being God’s people is not sanctioned by our own preferences, our own wants or our own needs.

Rather, like Jacob, let us take our rest, open our minds, release our hearts - and allow God to cut through the clamour, the clutter and the busyness of life to quietly and profoundly reach out and speak to each one of us.

So, friends, take the time to dream. Create a space in your life where God can speak to you. Let go those crazy agendas and ditch that baggage you may have carried for generations.

For, when we think we know it all, when we assume we are right, when we pursue our own agendas or, on the other hand, when are subject to the exploits or abuse of others because they say it’s okay – we, too, can get it terribly wrong!

Let us pray:

Gracious God, help us to be truly open to you and to your enduring, loving presence. Help us to dream, and in doing so, be ready to listen, to receive and to grow as your people.

Amen.

