

## SERMON FOR MOTHERING SUNDAY

Reading: Genesis 27:41-46 (about Rebekah)

I don't want to go on about how wonderful mothers are. Those of you who are mothers, even of grown-up children, would probably find that embarrassing; you're probably all too aware of the times you think you've failed your children. So I'm not going to say how wonderful you are - although you are! The times I had to look after our children for any length of time when they were small made me only too thankful I didn't have to do it much. I don't think there are many jobs more stressful than being a mother of small children - apart, perhaps, from being the mother of teenage children when they're in that nasty, sour stage. There aren't many mothers in the Bible that we get to know very well, so I thought it might be interesting to look at Rebekah; we do see what she's like, and how NOT to do things!

Abraham didn't approve of a local woman as a wife for his only son Isaac, so he sent a messenger 500 miles to his home town in Syria or northern Turkey, and there God quite miraculously guided the servant to Isaac's cousin, Rebekah, and ideal wife. So Rebekah comes south to marry Isaac, although she's never met him. But soon the excitement wears off: she doesn't like the local women either, she's probably homesick, Isaac is always on the move, and she can't get pregnant. It's 20 years until her only children are born: twins, Esau and Jacob. By this time Isaac is 60 and Rebekah doesn't seem very close to him. So, instead, she puts all her attention and ambition into her sons, especially the younger one, Jacob. Like many parents, Isaac the dad likes the macho, outdoor Esau, while mum favours the quiet, home-loving one. Perhaps Rebekah doesn't like Esau's hairiness or perhaps she remembers that when the twins were born, God had told her that Jacob the younger would be more important than Esau - which was unusual. Whatever the reason, Rebekah is ambitious for Jacob; she's a pusher and shover, not content to let God handle things. No wonder Jacob becomes a pusher and shover too, wangling out of Esau his birthright as eldest brother. Finally, there's the sorry incident when Rebekah and Jacob scheme together to outwit Esau and deceive Isaac, who seems more interested in food than anything else. So Jacob receives the blessing, which should be Esau's, and Esau is furious. And in the passage we read, we see how sharp-witted she is: she sends Jacob off to her home town, Haran, thus getting him away from his angry brother and father, and also from the local women she dislikes, and also manages at the same time to get him a good wife from her own people.

That's the last we see of Rebekah, but what can we learn from her? Two main things, I think:

1/ Let's not push and shove our children to do what we think is best for them, even if we're right. After all, Rebekah is right in promoting Jacob. But God can do his work, and later in Genesis (Chapter 48) he arranges very easily for a

younger son to receive the blessing instead of an older son. As I said, Rebekah is very ambitious for Jacob; I'm a pusher and shover too, although over the years I've learned to be less so. But it doesn't help Rebekah's marriage, nor does it help family relationships; there must have been a strained atmosphere at Isaac's breakfast table, just as there is at our tables often. Let's not try to force our children to be what we want them to be, to do what we want them to do. As Christians we know that our children aren't our possessions, but have been given us by God and belong to him; they're not ours to do what we want with. Let's not be like Rebekah, but like Hannah or Elizabeth or Mary, all of whom learn to give their children back to God even when they know that their sons will suffer.

2/ God can and does achieve what He wants despite our failings as parents. Isaac and Rebekah both have their clear favourite, and Isaac sounds rather dodderly and thinking mostly of his stomach. Rebekah comes close to destroying her family for the sake of her ambition. But through all the family squabbles, the mistakes, the deceit, God works his purposes out. If in our marriages and families, we're sincere in wanting what God wants, He will get his way, despite us! And we don't need to have hang-ups about the dreadful responsibility of bringing up children and the dreadful mistakes we make; we can sort those out with God, and perhaps with our family. God will get his way. If He could cope with Rebekah, He can cope with us too!

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