

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
God at Work in Flawed People
Genesis 29:15-28 & Romans 8:26-39

The story of Jacob, like the stories of other biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, can read more like a soap opera than the story of God's people. Yet when we listen more closely, we find something very real about them: something of our own struggles, our tensions with God and one another, and God's gracious dealings with fragile, flawed people.

First, let's press rewind. Twin boys, Esau and Jacob, are born to Rebekah and Isaac, struggling with each other even before birth. They are born into a dysfunctional family, and the conflict only deepens. It comes to a head when Jacob, helped by his mother, steals his elder brother's birthright and blessing. Jacob flees, convinced Esau will seek revenge. Then, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night, God comes to Jacob in a dream. Instead of berating him, God blesses him and promises to stay with him. Through Jacob, the promise will be fulfilled: a great nation will come from this family. It's an astonishingly gracious promise for a man running for his life, estranged from his family. But then, that's God for you.

This is a story of God using imperfect people, full of surprises as God overturns our expectations. God does things God's own way, including using self-centred rogues like Jacob. I wonder whether you, like me, have days when you question whether you can be of much use to God. We see our weaknesses and failings and wonder what God could possibly do with us. Yet this story tells us that God often chooses flawed people as instruments of the divine purpose.

If I'm honest, I can see bits of Jacob in me — and perhaps you can too. We may not like what we see, but that doesn't stop God from using us. Nor does God want us to stay as we are. Living with God means allowing God to change us. When we face the not-so-nice parts of ourselves, God can transform us and use us to bless others. For Jacob, that transforming work began at Bethel. It continues, but it won't be easy. Jacob meets his match in Laban — his future father-in-law and uncle. Laban is every bit as much a rogue and trickster as Jacob, and God will use even Laban to reshape him.

So, to replay today's episode: Jacob arrives in his mother's homeland and is welcomed by Uncle Laban, who offers to pay him for his work. Jacob has fallen in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, so he agrees to work seven years to marry her. We're told, "Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. But it only seemed like a few days, he loved her so much." Then, on the wedding night, the trickster is tricked. Laban gives Jacob his older daughter, Leah. The man who deceived his father and elder brother is himself deceived, and Jacob must work another seven years to marry Rachel.

What do we make of all this? We see God gradually transforming Jacob so that he can become the father of the nation. It reminds us that we too are being reshaped and refined to become more like Christ — and that can be an uncomfortable, even painful process. Often, what irritates us in others, mirrors something in ourselves we haven't faced. Perhaps Jacob had to meet someone as skilled in deception as he was before he could see what needed changing.

Up to this point, Jacob's world has revolved around Jacob. But now he's beginning to see beyond himself. At Bethel, a relationship with God begins to take shape; and spiritual experiences are meant to change us — not only how we relate to God, but also the way we relate to others. To love Rachel meant Jacob had to look beyond himself. Love takes us out of ourselves. It makes us think of another person. It also takes work. Jacob's long years of labour are a picture of the effort required in our own

relationships. Do we care enough about others — at home, among friends, and within our faith community — to work on our relationships?

Today's reading ends with Jacob having two wives, and with the sad note — which always leaves me feeling sorry for Leah — that "he loved Rachel more than Leah." As the story continues, we read of the births of their children, the struggles between the sisters, and Rachel's inability to conceive. Yet out of all this strife, Jacob and his wives become the parents of twelve sons and one daughter. At last, it begins to look as though God's promise — that a great nation will arise from this family — will be fulfilled.

Through all this struggle and pain, God is at work, using even the tangled parts of Jacob's life for his good and for the good of others. That brings us to Paul's words: "God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him." That doesn't mean we always get what we want. It means God is at work giving us what God knows we need.

Jacob's story reminds us that God mixes with people we might not expect — people who are deceptive, damaged, and flawed. But that is all God has to work with, because we are all flawed in different ways. Paul reminds us that many things can seem to be against us: "In certain ways we are weak, but the Spirit is here to help us." God is always at work, shaping us into the people we are called to be. And when the going gets tough, we return to the promise at the heart of the gospel: "Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!" That's how much God loves us — you and me — who, in our own ways, are like Jacob.

The story of Jacob and his family challenges us to be honest about ourselves. That can be hard. But it also assures us of God's faithfulness, gracious kindness, and promise to forgive, heal, and transform us.

Gracious God,
you know us as we are and love us still.
Help us to be honest before you,
open to your grace, and willing to be changed.
Shape us into the people you call us to be,
and keep us always in your love.

Alister Hendery
Taradale – 26.7.2026