

WEEDS & SEEDS GROWING TOGETHER

~ 'the forbearance of God'¹ ~

An Exploration by the Revd Clive H Norton on
Sunday 17th July 2011 at St Peter's Anglican Church,
Cremorne, NSW 2090.

Readings: Genesis 28:10-19; Psalm 139. 1-11, 23-24;
Romans 8: 12-25; Gospel: Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43.

Prayer: Living God,
may we encounter you this day
in the laughter of children
in the skills of those who create,
in the pauses of the elderly,
in the patience of those who teach,
in the loyalty of friends,
in the dedication of those who serve,
in the exuberance of animals,
in those willing to make fools of themselves.
May we be your blessing to one another.²

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We come to what is traditionally called a "Sermon"; I prefer the word "Exploration" for we are exploring together. We think together, maybe re-think and probably disagree with some of thoughts I put into the arena. We are on a journey to discover what "the Spirit is saying to the churches"<sup>3</sup> in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The main point of the readings we have heard today is the forbearance of God, the amazing patience of God. The reading from Genesis was one incident in the life of Jacob. He was, to use a modern colloquialism, 'a nasty piece of work'. Like many reported in the media with exponential disclosure in recent days<sup>4</sup>, Jacob was so ambitious that he was prepared to do anything to get ahead. Last week we heard the story of his birth in Genesis chapter 25:19-34. The patriarch Abraham's son, Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah, but she was barren for 20 years; then twins were born, first Esau and Jacob clinging to his heel. It's a messy story of parental favouritism, brothers falling out, with Jacob cheating his brother.

Next week we'll hear how his uncle Laban cheated Jacob deceiving him into nuptial intercourse his elder daughter Leah instead of Rachel the girl Jacob wanted to marry. Uncle Laban then required that Jacob serve another seven years for Rachel.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> July we shall hear the story of how flawed Jacob was profoundly changed by a nightmare of wrestling with a man and having his hip put out of joint. Jacob called the place Peniel saying, "*For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.*" From then onwards his name was changed from Jacob to Israel.

We can learn so much from the flawed characters in Bible narratives. In today's episode Jacob lay down to sleep with his head on a rock. He had a dream of a step-like structure reaching up into the sky. Little doubt his dream was triggered by his familiarity with the many ziggurats that archeologists have found in the Mesopotamian Valley, with a temple on top to

which men ascended to worship of the deity.

In his dream a voice encouraged Jacob, “*Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go...*” “Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘***Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!***’ That is the sort of experience many have. Flawed though we are, on some occasions we wake up, we become very aware of another dimension, an indefinable presence.

The poet who wrote Psalm 139, put it very personally:

“Lord you have searched me out and known me ...

You mark out my journeys and my resting place...

You encompass me behind and before...

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me...

Where can I go then from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

The Gospel reading for today is also about ‘the forbearance of God’, God being patient with flawed human beings. ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed’... but weeds grew up among the wheat. The slaves asked if they should go and pull the weeds out. But the owner answered, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.”

Matthew’s account was of course written down some decades after Jesus first told his parable. By the time it was penned by Matthew, Christians had been savagely persecuted the Roman authorities, by Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and the local synagogues. A natural and prudent reaction of Christian communities, coping with what was happening at that time, was to try to root out of their ranks those who might betray them.

When groups or institutions are under pressure, it is easy to lose perspective. Reasonable precautions, due to the political or social environment, may become dogma like ‘you can only be a Christian if you adhere perfectly to our rules’.

Perfectionism is a false ideology, a belief-system that forgets that all human beings, like Jacob, are flawed to our very core. There are always some people who are so psychologically insecure that they seek out leaders or groups that peddle ‘*certainty*’ to members who will surrender their lives and possessions to the cult.

Religious cults and sects flourish in times of uncertainty and upheaval, as is happening all over the world this century in the different economic and religious situations. Always a key strategy of cults, sects and increasingly large sections of Christian institutions and other religions, is to set up regimes that demand certain forms of “perfection” as defined by the high priests, rabbis, bishops, imans, pastors, leaders, etc. To meet those demands their ‘flock’ is to cut themselves off from those named as contaminated “weeds”, usually starting with parents and family.

At the heart of Jesus’ teaching is his insistence that it is not for us to try to separate good seed from weeds. My own observation as a member of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney for 49 years, a member of Synod for 30 years and on a range of Diocesan committees, and a

national commission of the Anglican Church of Australia, is that all forms of *'churchmanship'* (as it used to be called!) - from conservative evangelical, evangelical, liberal, middle-of-the-road "stole-wearing" churches, Oxford movement Anglicans, Anglo-Catholics aligned with Rome, etc., all have been contaminated by cult perfectionism and often try to do what the slaves in Jesus' original parable wanted to do, "root out the weeds".

In Sydney the nominally 'wealthiest' Anglican Diocese, fear of difference and fear of inclusiveness is entrenched and has been fostered even more in this last decade. Where do we find in our Diocese **'the forbearance of God'** being modelled?

From the hierarchy of lay and clerical 'would-be controllers' we get continuing forms of exclusion: e.g. a clergyman who has been divorced cannot become Rector of a parish, nor is it likely that an unmarried man will be appointed; women are still not recognised as equal with men.

I am increasingly ill-at-ease over public statements by bishops and others about homosexuality. What is said and how it is said has led young people, older men and women to leave the churches. It fosters intolerance and fuels brutal homophobia, leading to poofster bashings and murders in Australia, Nigeria, Kenya and around the world. I was five years old when the 1939 World War broke out; I remember vividly the warning slogan because of the danger of spies and Nazi sympathizers, "Loose tongues cost lives". Loose tongues about homosexuality in the world today can cost lives. This should be disturbing the conscience of all who claim to try to follow Jesus the Christ.

Perhaps our Anglican Diocese of Sydney is far from being 'wealthy' because it has put its energies into encouraging attitudes that judge others and into making rules and regulations that exclude those who are 'not the sort of people we want to associate with'.

There is enough suffering in the world without ecclesiastical bodies inflicting more hurt, suffering, anxiety and rejection onto other people who also are "created in the image of God". We like Jacob and countless characters in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, are all flawed and scarred. Who are we to make spiritual judgements?

In the epistle for today Romans 8:12-25 St Paul wrote that if we live just by the impulses of the flesh we will die an incomplete life. But if by the Spirit we put to death the deeds of the body, we will live. There is more to life than money, material things and physicality. Paul's message is very positive, **"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."**

We know that we are just like all other human beings, marred and flawed, often groaning inwardly because of our failures and misused opportunities. But we are also aware that sometimes the Spirit of God is able to bring about through us some of the fruit of the Spirit:  
"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,  
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>5</sup>

I will end with the words of Professor Tomas Halik of Charles University Prague, who is in Australia and on the ABC Radio National's Encounter program a fortnight ago<sup>6</sup>:

**Patience with others is love,  
patience with self is hope,  
patience with God is faith.**

**Those three virtues - love, hope and faith - are the heart of Christianity."**

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<sup>1</sup> Reginald H Fuller, Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today; Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota; 1884 p.150.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Cotter, Out of the Silence ... Prayer's Daily Round Cairns Publications Harlech 2006; Proceeding p.514; [www.cottercairns.co.uk](http://www.cottercairns.co.uk)

<sup>3</sup> The New Testament, The Revelation to John 2:7,11 ,17,29; 3:6,13,22 - '**Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.**'

<sup>4</sup> The *News of the World's* violation of peoples' privacy and the allegations of corrupt actions by the News International media empire of Rupert Murdoch and family.

<sup>5</sup> St Paul's Letter to Galatians 4:22.

<sup>6</sup> Tomas Halik, Professor of philosophy of religions at Charles University, Praque, on ABC Radio National 3July2011, Encounter program (printout available) [abc.net.au](http://abc.net.au)

Enquiries, comments and criticisms are invited; also requests for additional copies of scripts or permission to quote / reproduce.

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