

## **Opening Prayers<sup>1</sup>**

Rejoice all spirits!

The ascending sun shines alike on the living and the dead.

As the true Helios, Christ climbed the heights of heaven.

Christ the Sun of suns, risen from the wintry ground of death, now scatters the darkness from our path.

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour, Radiant in the brightness of your King!  
Christ has conquered death! Glory fills you!

Darkness vanishes for ever! Alleluia!

Exult in glory! The risen Saviour shines upon you! Alleluia!

God, renew me from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. Amen.

...

Risen Christ we welcome you.

You are the flowering bough of creation;

From you cascades music like a million stars,

Truth to cleanse a myriad souls.

From you flee demons, omens and all ill will;

Around you rejoice the angels of light.

*The Community of Aidan and Hilda*

Last week, we left Jacob at Bethel, where he has his powerful encounter with God. He was on his way from his home, escaping the wrath of his brother Esau, to his grandfather's relatives in Harran.

As we pick up the story this week, he has arrived there and met his cousin Rachel, a beautiful shepherd (and the only female shepherd mentioned in the Bible). As we pick up the story, he is staying at her family home, headed by her father, Jacob's Uncle Laban.

[Genesis 29:15-28](#)

It's easy to read the Bible from the standpoint of our existing prejudices. Someone once said, 'If your God hates the same things that you hate, you're not worshipping God, you've created an idol.'

And in this story, as Jacob the deceiver is himself deceived by his scheming Uncle Laban, it's easy to fall into that trap. 'He got a taste of his own medicine.' 'What goes around comes around.' 'Karma.' And so on.

But the Bible isn't there for us to luxuriate in our own self-righteousness. When we do that, we are no better than pigs rolling around in the muck. This episode belongs as part of a bigger story, and we must remember that.

Within that bigger story, what do we see? What good news, what Gospel, do we find here?

**Firstly**, this is a story about *transformation*. Since his life-changing encounter with God at Bethel, Jacob is a changed man. No longer is he a deceiver. He engages in no manipulation in pursuing his desire for Rachel. He is straightforward, open, and honest.

I do not mean to suggest that he has become perfect overnight, not least because there will still be the odd hint of weakness in later episodes. But I do believe that something has decisively changed in him, because he has met with God, and because God is no longer simply the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. God is now his God. God is with Jacob. And it begins to show.

Isn't this what we expect when we believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ? When we come into contact with this God and put our lives in his hands, then we begin to change. It isn't all instantaneous transformation, it is more what the Apostle Paul speaks of in the first chapter of Philippians, where he says that the God who has begun a good work in the Philippians will complete it on the day of Christ Jesus. God begins a lifelong project of transformation in our lives.

The playwright Murray Watts tells a beautiful story in one of his books about a man who was having coffee after a church service.

The people around him were discussing the sermon on miracles and someone asked him, 'Do you believe that Jesus turned water into wine?'

‘I’m only a beginner,’ he said, ‘I can’t speak about water into wine yet, but in the few weeks I’ve known Christ, he’s managed to turn beer into furniture and betting slips into groceries.’<sup>2</sup>

We may or may not have come from a similar background to that man, but it’s only right to ask if there is evidence of God doing his transforming work in our lives. We don’t always see it well ourselves: it may be best to ask those closest to us.

And if we are not being transformed over a period of time, perhaps we need to look seriously at our faith.

**Secondly**, this is a story about *love*. Well of course it’s a love story, you say. And it’s a twisted love story where the path to true love is neither smooth nor straight.

But it’s more than a human love story. Mills and Boon it ain’t. Jacob’s love shows that transformation in his life that we’ve just talked about, because in various ways his love for Rachel echoes the God whose presence has changed him forever.

Serving seven years sounds difficult to our culture, especially our ‘How soon before we sleep together?’ culture. Although Methodists of a certain age might recognise something there – those of you of an older generation will remember the years when Methodist ministerial students and probationer ministers had to wait all the way through college and probation before the church allowed them to marry their fiancées. Seven years wasn’t untypical.

Jacob is prepared to play the long game to win Rachel, and in that respect his love is similar to God’s love for us. Rarely does someone come to faith the moment they encounter God for the first time. God’s love is patient and persistent.

I have a book on my desk that I plan to read over the summer. It’s called ‘The Works of His Hands’ and it’s by Sy Garte, an American biochemist. He grew up in a communist and therefore atheist family. Only later in life did he become a Christian. It took a long time for him to realise that science could not answer all the questions that life throws up. God chipped away at him for many years.

Are we prepared to take the long haul of endurance as we demonstrate the love of God to others?

As well as long-term endurance, Jacob reflects divine love in the way his love absorbs Laban's deceitfulness and trickery. Sure, Jacob confronts the situation when he discovers that Laban has substituted Leah for Rachel, there's nothing wrong with that, in fact it's good and healthy. But there is neither rage nor rancour. Just as Jesus was to absorb the sin of the world out of love, so in a small way Jacob absorbs the consequences of Laban's sin.

Now we cannot die for the sins of the world. But are there times when God calls us to absorb the consequences of someone else's wrongdoing for the sake of love – his love? Couples and families who stay together and thrive will surely have done this. So will those communities that are a place of healing.

**Thirdly** and finally, this is a story about *grace*. We've just seen that in Jacob's love absorbing Laban's sin, but in the wider picture this is a story of God graciously working with messed-up, sinful people. He is working with people who seem to think that daughters are commodities to be traded.

And the daughters themselves aren't much better. In the next episode (which we don't get to read in this series) the two sisters engage in what some have called 'baby wars'. They compete to see who can give Jacob more children. Not only that, they throw their servants into the mix, also sleeping with Jacob and also bearing children. The family trait for scheming is still present.

Manipulation and competition continue. Yet even Rachel and Leah, with their twisted morality, can be grateful to God for the gifts of the children that result.

From God's side, he is working in and through people who are not living by his standards. As we observed the other week, the biblical standard for marriage is set near the beginning of Genesis in chapter 2 verse 24, where it is one man and one woman for life. Jesus and Paul both went back to that standard in their teaching, too. But here we have polygamy, and God continues to work out his purposes through sinful relationships.

Well, thank God that he uses sinners to accomplish his will. If he didn't, not one of us could be used by him. We all disqualify ourselves from his kingdom. But by grace he calls us to himself and we serve the purposes of his glorious plan, sinners that we are.

To be sure, none of that is to make any excuse for our sin. Confession, forgiveness, and holiness are still central to God's agenda for us. But he does not wait for perfection.

So I wonder whether any of us have been holding back from the call of God because we think we are too sinful to be used by him. If you are, then let me quote to you an old Christian saying: God does not call the qualified, he qualifies the called.

Remember – in his grace he calls you out of love and he is setting out to transform you anyway. So what is stopping you from answering his call?

### **Prayers**

Christ of the Easter rising

Hope is one of your best gifts to us

So teach us to give it to others.

*A prayer from Brazil*

Dear Father God I have voyaged to this place and here I pause.

My life so far has brought me here.

My future stretches farther than the eye can see.

If thus far my journey you have shared, accompany me now.

Give wisdom, light, and always joy so that in my thought and gift and love my life shall be to fellow travellers a witness to your presence in the world.

Amen.

*Ian Fosten*

### **Closing Prayer of Dedication and Benediction**

Christ, we offer you our souls and bodies,

our thoughts and words and deeds,

our love for one another,

our past and our future.

Unite our will in your will.

May we and our children grow together in love and peace all the days of our life, through the Christ, our Lord.

Amen.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> All prayers this week (except the benediction) are taken from Ray Simpson, *A Holy Island Prayer Book* . Gardners Books. Kindle Edition. Some Kindle books, including this one, do not have conventional pagination. These prayers are from the section Sunday, Week 1.

<sup>2</sup> Murray Watts, *Rolling In The Aisles*, p134.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Simpson, *Tree of Life: Celtic Prayers to the Universal Christ*. Anamchara Books. Kindle Edition, p199.