

The value of things

Several years ago, the Sydney Morning Herald reported how John Singleton would buy his coffee every morning. In his office building, like so many others, there was a coffee bar in the foyer. Office workers would queue up for their morning caffeine fix, the barista would take their order, write it on a cup lid, and the cup lids would be lined up on the bench. At the time, a large coffee cost \$3.

Mr Singleton would arrive, and the barista would notice him approaching the door, and immediately abandon the coffee orders in the queue, so he could make Mr Singleton's coffee. By the time Singo got to the coffee bar, his coffee would be ready: the barista would hand Mr Singleton his coffee, and Mr Singleton would hand the barista a \$50 note. Transaction completed, the coffee man would return to the next in the queue, the businessman would carry on to his office.

So how much do you think John Singleton's coffee was worth? The \$50 he paid for it? The \$3 someone else would have paid for exactly the same order, but would have had to wait? The dollar or so cost of the ingredients?

At one level, \$50 for a coffee seems completely bizarre. But at another – well, the Herald did the calculations of the value of John Singleton's time, and found that he would need to be earning "\$156,250 an hour to maintain his current ranking in BRW. That would mean five minutes of his time is worth \$13,020.83" and concluded it that was "not a bad return on \$50".

We encounter similar apparent distortion of the value of things in today's reading from Genesis – but with the scripture reading it is about the value of a bowl of stew. Or maybe, it's about the value of a birthright.

Isaac doesn't get a major part in the stories of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. Both his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob, had far bigger parts to play.

Isaac is mostly known for the story of when God called Abraham to sacrifice him that we had a couple of weeks ago, and the story that we've had today. But nevertheless, he takes his place as one of the patriarchs, and God is often referred to in the first part of the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Our reading from Genesis 25 today picks up the story of when Isaac, the son of Abraham, was forty years old, and he married Rebecca. But they didn't conceive a child, so we read in verse 21 that Isaac appealed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was barren; and while verse 21 also tells us that the Lord answered their prayer, it's easy to miss how long that answer took. Verse 20 tells us that Isaac was forty when they married, but verse 26 tells us that Isaac was sixty when Rebecca gave birth. From the marriage, through the prayers, the entreaties to God for an heir, to conception of their children had taken nineteen or twenty years. That's a long time. A long time to be praying for something specific, a long time to be waiting, a long time to have faith that God would – or indeed could – answer prayer.

And when they did conceive, when their prayers were answered, it was not as they probably expected. It was twins! And the twins fought in her womb – verse 22 “The babies jostled each other within her”.

It was certainly disturbing, and quite likely painful for Rebecca as well, she said “Why is this happening to me?” and prayed for guidance.

And God answered her prayer. But God didn’t answer with an assurance that ‘everything will be okay’ or even tell her to be patient. God told her something quite unexpected:

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” (Gen 25:23)

And so, when the twins are born, we read how Esau, the stronger one, was delivered first – his body all red and hairy. But almost at the same time, grasping his brother’s heel, came Jacob. Jacob, who was the weaker, who it seems had lost the struggle to be the firstborn.

Verse 27 tells us that “The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.” There’s a lot to be inferred from that verse – I think we all have known children like Esau and like Jacob. Esau was the tough one, he spent his time outdoors and hunting, if there had been rugby played at the time, he would have been in the first fifteen. And he would have been in the thick of the action.

By contrast, Jacob was a quiet boy. He liked staying indoors, and the rugby field would have had no appeal to him. He certainly would have been looked down on by his elder brother.

And not only were the twins very different, but their differences divided their parents as well, as we read in verse 28 “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Just like, I think, we want our children to be friends, we don’t want to have favourites among our children. We want to treat our children equally, and yet, well, Isaac loved Esau because he brought him game.

And it’s noted that Rebecca loved Jacob over Esau, we’re not told why. It could be she didn’t like Esau’s toughness, or because she liked Jacob’s company indoors – or at least in the tent – most of the time. And to be fair, it could have been because she saw her husband neglecting their younger son, and sought to ‘balance things out’.

We don’t know the details, or Rebecca’s motivation, but we can understand that it wasn’t an ideal situation – it wasn’t a happy family. There were tensions between the twins, there were tensions between the husband and wife.

And then “*Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!”*” (25:29-30)

He’s not just hungry, but he’s ‘famished’, and the implication is that he was very hungry – maybe not literally starving to death, but he may have gone several days without eating, having been out on an unproductive hunt.

Jacob answered, *“First sell me your birthright.”* (29:31)

Esau said, *“Look, I am about to die... what good is the birthright to me?”* (29:32)

Now, it may have been hyperbole, but it could be a reasonable point.

But Jacob answered, *“Swear to me first.”* (29:33)

As Christians when we read this story, we often focus on Esau’s apparently foolish decision to give up his birthright for a bowl of stew. But if we declare Esau a fool, where does that leave us in terms of how we should regard Jacob?

If Esau really was starving, was it in any way right that Jacob demand is birthright in exchange for food? Or if Esau was really just a fool, was it right for Jacob take advantage of his brother’s foolishness?

If Esau did the wrong thing, does it follow that Jacob did the right thing? They were twins, so in some way the birthright should have been Jacob’s too, shouldn’t it? And even if it should have been all or partly his, was it right to take advantage of his brother to get it?

If we miss out on something, do we think it’s okay to be a bit underhanded, to take advantage of others, to make things a bit fairer?

But regardless of the fairness of the transaction, Esau made the vow and gave his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave him some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank and then got up and left. (25:33-34)

The narrative makes it clear: *“So Esau despised his birthright.”* (Gen 25:34b)

We know that Jacob gave Esau some lentil stew, and some bread. By no means an exciting or interesting meal, but certainly one that was satisfying – one that satisfied Esau’s hunger, his immediate need.

But on the other hand, what Esau gave Jacob didn’t really have an immediate value – while their father Isaac was still living, the birthright couldn’t be realised. And the potential value of the birthright was not that much – some land to occupy, some livestock, and not so much as a house – only a collection of tents.

But also, in this transaction – in the “selling” of the birthright – Esau had sold off something of potentially great value (God’s promises to Abraham, no less, *“I will make you into a great nation”* (Gen 12:2)), in order to satisfy an immediate need.

We would never do that today would we? Or would we? I know of discussions around church property where there’s often a desire to sell off property – land and buildings – to fund mission or ministry, or even simply to sell some buildings to maintain others. While I wouldn’t claim it is the same situation, it is still about balancing immediate benefits – the bowl of stew or some cash in the bank – and the potential – whether the value of the buildings present day Christian’s have inherited from the generations that have gone before us, or the promises of a birthright.

So what is it that we should learn from this passage? Is it simply that Esau didn't value his birthright, and that we should be careful we don't undervalue the things that we have?

It's sometimes observed that when we open the scriptures, we look for instructions that we should follow and warnings that we should heed. But the bible is not simply a "book of lessons", it's the story of God's relationship with creation, his people, and God's promises for the future.

Often, when we read the bible we learn not just lessons for us, but we learn about people – about ourselves, and most importantly, we learn about God. God who created all things. God who created us. God who people turned against. God who sent his son Jesus to save us. God who has a plan for the future.

So if we look at this passage from that perspective - what do we learn about God from it?

The first thing that we probably note is that God works through flawed people. Isaac and Rebecca are both flawed – they each favour one son over the other son – Esau is flawed – he sells his birthright for a bowl of stew – and Jacob is flawed too – he takes advantage of his hungry brother.

And that's a fair conclusion – that God works through flawed people. But if that is the central thing to take from this, an awful lot of the Old Testament teaches the same lesson over and over again. The bible is full of stories of flawed people: Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham and so on and on. In fact, it's not until the New Testament that we encounter someone who isn't flawed.

So the fact that God works through flawed people is perhaps not the main thing we can learn here.

We can also see that God also works things despite flawed people. Even in the face of rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden, God put in place a plan to reconcile creation with him, even in the face of almost all creation doing evil, God saved the world through Noah, even in the face of Isaac and Rebecca's partiality to their particular favourite son, God was working through them to establish the people of Israel, through whom all peoples would be blessed.

And not only does God work despite flawed people, but God is patient. He was patient with the patriarchs and the matriarchs, he was patient with the nation of Israel, he was patient with the disciples, and God is patient with us, too. Of course, we should be patient too, just like Isaac and Rebecca were in this reading – waiting twenty years for their prayers to be answered.

One of the big things I think we can learn from the story of Jacob and Esau is that the true value of things is not always apparent - that we don't always appreciate what things are worth. And this works both ways - that bowl of stew turned out to be very valuable! It may be that the things we would typically regard as low value are of great use to God and the growth of God's kingdom.

What does it mean for how we treat the things we have? Do we give up future possibilities, for what we see as the needs of the present? Do we not use the gifts God has given us because we feel they are insignificant? Do we think our small contributions to the sharing of the good news of Christ with others aren't going to make much difference?

This passage confirms that we must trust God! That God has plan - a plan for us as individuals, a plan for us as a community here, a plan for his Church, and a plan for his whole world.

We must be faithful. Answers to prayer do not always come quickly or in the ways we might like, but we should be assured, that even if we are flawed, that we do is important, and has ramifications that we will not always foresee, but in all things, God is in control. We saw it a couple of weeks ago in the story of Abraham and Isaac, and we see it again today: God is in control.

God is in control and has a plan for you and for me, and not just for us as individuals but also for our whole congregation here at St Ives, and for all people, and for the whole of creation!

We read in 1 Peter that God *"has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you."* (1 Peter 1:3-4).

The things that distract us from that inheritance may not be as obvious as a bowl of stew for a hungry man. But they will be tempting. Fame? Fortune? Family? Health? Security? They can all tempt us away from that inheritance.

We must appreciate the value of our inheritance – the living hope that we have in Christ.

And as we go about our lives, we must also not undervalue the gifts God has given us as individuals, as a congregation, and as a church.

What if we're the person with modern day equivalent of Jacob's bowl of stew - what could we achieve with our item of little apparent value, by the grace of God?

We should never underestimate the value of the gifts that God has given us.

Jacob's bowl of stew bought a birthright, and founded the people of Israel.

David, the shepherd boy with his sling, saved the nation of Israel from Goliath.

Much later, five loaves and two small fishes would feed the five thousand (John 6:5-15)

But most important of all, in Christ, the death of one man brought salvation for all.

Amen.