

Genesis 29.14-30

26th July 2026

SERMON.

God's love works for good, despite our chaos.

Six prime ministers in just ten years! The past decade has seen the UK go through a period of unusually high political turnover. Andy Burnham, who [took office](#) on Monday 20 July, was preceded by Keir Starmer, Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Boris Johnson, and Theresa May, none of whom made it past three years in post. If David Cameron had hung on for just one more week, we'd have made it to *seven* PMs in a decade; but as his premiership finished on 13 July 2016, he's *just* outside the limit.

The [press](#) and [pundits](#) have noticed. And, as NBC News has illustrated, delightfully, [Larry the cat](#) is now the most stable force in Downing Street. We live in tumultuous, messy times.

[Burnham's route to the top job](#) in UK politics has been a winding one. He has two unsuccessful party leadership bids under his belt, in 2010 and 2015. But he persisted. A detour to become the first mayor of Greater Manchester could have kept him further off course but instead allowed him to build the momentum that's brought him to power. Life doesn't always follow a simple, straight line.

Jacob, as we know from our vantage point centuries later, had a part to play in God's redemptive plan. But, at this point in his story, the route forwards isn't clear. Having collaborated with his mother in tricking his father and brother, he's run away from the ensuing mess. Now he becomes the victim of Laban's trick. It's not a pretty story, especially for the two sisters, Leah and Rachel, now pitted against each other in competition for their husband's attention (Genesis 29:15-28). But eventually, if we read on beyond today's passage, we learn that from the root of this chaotic family tree is born the Prince of Peace. Unloved Leah bears a fourth son, Judah, for whom she praises the Lord (Genesis 29:35). And Judah becomes ancestor to David, and David to Jesus, the saviour who brings reconciliation to us all.

This episode in Jacob's life unfolds like a scene from a Shakespeare comedy: rich with love, trickery, disguised identities, and clever negotiations.

Jacob, too, must find a wife from the kinsfolk of Abraham, as his father, Isaac, had done before him. He goes to the house of his uncle Laban (brother to Jacob's mother,

Rebekah) to find a wife. He falls for Rachel, but Laban tricks him into marrying his eldest daughter, Leah, first.

Again this is a story from a different culture and a different time which needs some unpacking. In many ways it is very alien to us. In other ways it is very relevant to us exploring themes of love, lust, deceit, envy and family dysfunction. Throughout it all God's providence and purposes working through the mess.

It is comical. One can only imagine Jacob's face on the morning after his wedding and he wakes up from a drunken stupor and realises he has slept with the wrong girl.

His uncle Laban has made him work for seven years before he can have sex with the girl he has fallen for. An example of true love waits – he has repressed his libido for all that time and then finally he says:

²¹ to Laban, 'Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.'

²² So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. ²³ But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. ²⁴ And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.

²⁵ When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?'

Jacob, remember deceived his brother Esau out of his birthright and deceived his father Isaac not giving him Esau's blessing. Now the deceiver is the one deceived. In Laban he has met his match. He expresses his libido alright but not in the direction he had in mind, so he completes his honeymoon week and then starts again with Rachel and knuckles down for another seven years of work for his uncle Laban.

The person he has married is not the person he thought she was. Of course, all married couples have that experience one way or another. You are not the person I thought you were. That can be a delight, an invitation to further intimacy and adventure, the curiosity of love. It can also be a disappointment and even lead to break up.

Times have changed haven't they in how we go about relationships. A couple of generations ago it was frowned upon living together before you were married. My mother once threatened my brother and I (I was only 11 years old at the time) that if either of us started living in sin, as she delicately phrased it, she would cut us out of her will. As she didn't leave much, I guess it was an empty threat.

I know some churches today take a strict line on people's sex lives. They cite certain scriptures to make the case for no sex before marriage. The trouble with going back to

scripture is which scripture you cite. This story has Jacob waiting until he is married to have sex but then treats his first wife badly, has sex with her maidservant, marries a second wife and also has sex with her maidservant and raises 12 kids through four women, two of whom are his wives, two are his servants. Marriages in those days were about economic survival rather than love. Completely different context. Biblical morality?

As I come to the end of my ministry here you may want to assess my approach to sexuality and relationships and whether you want the next minister to share those views. Most of you are too polite to question or challenge me.

Christian theology is gradually recovering a sense that we don't need to be afraid of the pleasures of our bodily nature. But it still wants to suggest that we remember that these pleasures are a sign and seal of unity, relatedness and commitment. For the Christian sex should be part of a covenant between two persons, because it is a reflection or earthly representation of the covenant or marriage between God and his people and Christ and his church. Sex is the outward and visible sign of the mutual commitment that is achieved in a true relationship.

Theoretically, human beings could achieve that level of commitment with more than one person. But experience has told us that given our distracted and selfish nature it doesn't work out like that. The story of Jacob and his two wives and two maidservants are a case in point. Polygamous, polyamorous, open relationships rarely work and usually end in pain. It may start in lust but it ends in pain no matter how many Netflix series tries to suggest otherwise.

To succeed in developing trusting human relationships we need to concentrate, which is another way of saying we need to be faithful.

I think of our sexuality on a continuum that stretches from full covenantal relationship of marriage to the most casual sexual encounter. Casual promiscuity perhaps should be the object of our compassion rather than our condemnation, since much of it seems to be a flight from loneliness. You want to be held, loved, no matter how fleetingly. A bit of fun maybe - but deeper than that perhaps it reveals an ability to make yourself vulnerable - to be independent but still needing to be united to someone. There are other relationships that are far from the ideal but have something of the ideal in them. Many love affairs are of this sort. There is a genuine if disordered love in them. Yet there is always a meanness and deceit, a stealing of love in any affair.

Further up the continuum are those stable relationships between the unmarried. Many of these reflect many aspects of the ideal. A level of commitment and fidelity and we can affirm much. I find it difficult believe that God doesn't rejoice in such commitment and growth.

Rather than condemning people is a Christian ethic holding out to people a vision of the ideal and encouraging them towards it?

But the problem in this story is that Jacob is in love with Rachel not Leah. It is sometimes suggested that Leah had weak eyes (verse 17) and therefore may not have been an enticing prospect for a wife, although there is some doubt over this because the word translated as 'weak' can also mean 'soft' or 'lovely'. Either way, Jacob had already met Rachel (see Genesis 29:9-12), so it may simply be the case that he had fallen in love with the young shepherdess before even meeting her older sister.

Even so, verse 26 tells us that, by asking for the younger daughter and leaving the eldest unmarried, Jacob was going against the culture of Laban's people. Laban seems to see this as justification for his deception, which Leah goes along with.

Laban explains his deceit by explaining that, if Jacob married Rachel before Leah was wed, Leah would be seen by other men as rejected and spoiled. It was culturally unheard of for the younger daughter to be married ahead of an older one. Laban's deception preserves Leah's dignity and gives her hope of a life with purpose and financial security. Laban obscured the truth of his daughter's identity at the wedding feast, but he secured justice for her it could be argued.

But this was a patriarchal society where the women get no say in what happens to them. They are passed from man to man. They have no power or agency.

This and other texts in scripture have oppressed women and sanctified patriarchy for centuries.

Tony Campolo the great American Evangelical Baptist preacher was speaking at Greenbelt once about Power and authority. He said power is inversely related to love. Whoever has power in a relationship exercises the least love. In a marriage for example a man can come and go. The wife is in love with him and will do anything for him. Who is in control? Who can dictate the terms in the relationship? He has power and control but he has not love. More you love the more vulnerable you become. That's why the stoic philosophers said don't love anyone because you will become vulnerable. Jesus became vulnerable as he hung on the cross. Can't express love without giving up power.

Campolo said that every time he speaks in family conferences there is always a man who asks the question: who's supposed to be the head of the house.

I must interject at this point and say that my wife is happy for me to be the head of our household, so long as she is the neck who turns the head!

Campolo said real Christians never ask that question – who is master. Jesus says never ask can I be the master – instead be someone's servant. In my kingdom those who would be master should be servant. Who's the head of household? Bible says (Eph 5) women submit to husband. Next verse – husband love wives as Christ loved church and gave himself for it. He loved church by becoming a slave for it – gave himself up for the church. What women would not submit themselves to a man who would be her slave? If she is being submissive and he being a slave who is in charge? Try Jesus. Be in dialogical relationship to discover what Christ wants done in the home.

Campolo said the feminist movement were correct when they said they were fed up with pushy dominating obnoxious men. But they were also right when they said the answer to that is not to replace them with pushy, dominating, obnoxious women. Wives and husbands submit to yourselves in love – each esteeming each other in love. The husband says 'My hopes dreams and aspirations – I sacrifice so can be everything you want to be' – but then wife says 'no I sacrifice myself'. The first argument – the only argument allowed in scripture – is how to outdo each other in love! Esteem each other better than yourselves. Campolo said marriages are falling apart because too many play power games. There are too many control freaks. You can't breathe in those relationships. Jesus set us free to esteem each other in love.

Ancient listeners to this story would have known that this apparent 'mess' was all part of God's good plan – Jacob needed both wives, plus their maids (see Genesis 30), to bear him the 12 sons who would later become the 12 patriarchs of the tribes of Israel.ⁱ

Navigating the mess

Did you watch any of the World Cup? (The men's football version, that is). For the majority of the tournament, it seemed as if France were the team to beat. They were playing the best football; beating teams with ease.

It was theirs to lose.

And then they went and lost to Spain in the semi-final, before they lost to England in the Bronze Medal match. Suddenly, having made playing football seem so easy, they went and made it all Messi. Sorry...messy...

I don't know about you, but far too often in life I look at other people's lives and think that they've got it all sorted. A bit like France before they lost to Spain, it can sometimes appear that everyone else knows what they're doing at work, school or family life – until, at some point, things go wrong. They might have amazing photos or videos on Facebook / Instagram / TikTok. If they're in work, they're making amazing career choices on LinkedIn, whilst for parents, everyone else's kids are in bed by 8pm...

And yet if we look at our own lives, we know it's a mess.

And yet...and yet. It's at moments like this that I'm glad stories like today's passage involving Laban, Jacob, Rachel and Leah are included in the Bible. I'm glad that Scripture doesn't shy away from the messiness of human life. Because it shows us that God works in and through the messy situations that we find ourselves in; **and** he works in and through messy people. Messy people like your friends and your siblings; your church leaders and your teachers; your parents and, dare I say...messy people like me and you?

Corrie Ten Boom famously linked the human view of life to seeing the back of a tapestry – it might look messy to us, but we can trust that, from God's perspective, a beautiful thing is being woven. It seems Jacob's tapestry had got into an almighty knot! Yet, as we read the story thousands of years later, we are invited to see God at work in the tangled mess, quietly fulfilling his purposes. God is working unseen in our messy world.

Faced with life's mess, from the trivial, like a pile of damaged, out-of-fashion, or ill-fitting clothing, to the truly painful, like a dysfunctional family dynamic, a betrayal, or the derailment of a dream, we might be tempted to give up - throw out the clothes or throw up our hands in despair. But God suggests there is another way, through the tumult towards transformation. In Romans 8:26-27, Paul writes that the Spirit will help us call out to God, even when we are too troubled to know how. The Spirit "intercedes with sighs too deep for words". And God will answer. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) Jacob, the tricked trickster, becomes father to a nation. Leah, the unloved wife, becomes mother to the line of Jesus. In God's hands the unlikely material of our lives is transformed into something glorious (Romans 8:30), the loving family of the kingdom of God.

Questions for discussion

- Have you ever worked a transformation on something? Perhaps you've picked up a piece of furniture discarded on the pavement and painted it to make it fit for your home; patched or adjusted a shirt or dress from the back of your wardrobe to make it wearable again; or dug and planted a neglected patch of ground to

grow vegetables or flowers. What prompted you to begin and how did you find the process and the result? As you reflect or discuss, pause also to think about how God's love transforms us.

- Many families are troubled by division, jealousy, or difficult dynamics. Is yours? In private, or with chosen *trusted* friends, can you bring these situations to God? Even if you do not have the words, bring your sighs: the Spirit will intercede for you and God will hear. Even though the road through this world may remain a rocky one, God will be with you. Claim the promise of Romans 8:38-39: "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

ⁱ Jonathan Buckley is the Redevelopment Manager at [St Paul's Wordsworth Avenue](#) in Sheffield and the Youth Development Worker at [YMCA White Rose](#) in Rotherham. Rebecca Froleay was the launch editor for the Roots website 20+ years ago and now works in web management in the culture and heritage sector. She worships at a Baptist church in the London Borough of Sutton where she helps with the young people's groups, and a small Christian development charity.

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2026/144-july-august-2026-a/proper-12/the-week-in-focus>