

A few people have commented about the shock they felt when, on the first Sunday of Advent, I spoke about King David and described his character as he appears in the 2nd Book of Samuel and the 1st Book of Kings. A well respected scholar entitled a work about Israel's second monarch- "*David's Secret Demons; Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King.*"* His family life disintegrated into a series of rape, murder, rebellion and further murder after David had destroyed the family life of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah with the double crime of adultery and multiple murder.

Family life does not get a great write up in the Hebrew Bible. The Books of Wisdom praise it, certainly; and give proverbial, sound rules for its smooth running; but in the narratives in the Torah family life is generally dysfunctional and unhappy, filled with animosity and strife.

The first family, Adam and Eve and their children, establish the sad and fatal pattern. When God walks in the Garden in the cool of the evening and asks "where are you?" and then: "What have you done?" Adam's reply shifts the blame - "Not me! Her! (whom you, God, put with me)". And Eve: "Not me! It – the serpent" (whom you, God, made – so the fault is God's!).

Their first child is the hard man Cain; their second the wisp of breath, '*Hevel*'. And murder is the first brotherly act we hear about.

Isaac is a passive character who does very little , even his wife is found for him by a servant of Abraham, but when we consider what his father threatened him with we can understand why.

Jacob, second child of Isaac, goads his starving, and rather stupid, brother into giving up his birth right as first-born for a bowl of lentil stew. Encouraged by his mother he then deceives his old, blind father with a downright lie - "I am Esau, your first-born" - fooling the old man into giving him the blessing belonging to his elder brother. Jacob has to flee for his life such is Esau's furious anger. Twenty years later he returns, approaching Esau with fear and trepidation. The reconciliation is almost an anti-climax. Esau the hot-headed youth has grown into a mature and balanced adult who does not hold grudges.

While he was in his self imposed exile Jacob had fallen in love with the beautiful Rachael and worked seven years to pay her uncle for the privilege of marriage. He wakes after the wedding to find he is wedded to Leah, the older and plain sister. The trickster has been duped. Consistently in Torah, you get back what you have given out. Jacob gets his girl but has to work seven more years to pay the bride-price. Leah gives him six sons and a daughter but is never loved by him. Rachael, the love of his life, cannot produce children. "Give me sons or I will die", she screams at him.

Eventually she produces Joseph and then Benjamin, dying in child birth. Jacob remains disconnected to Leah. He never calls her his wife, even when he buries her in the family mausoleum.

Joseph grows up to be a spoilt brat and tale-teller. His brothers hate him and eventually sell him into slavery and deceive his father into thinking Joseph is dead. His bloodied coat is the evidence. Jacob had tricked his father wearing the clothes of his brother. What you measure out is what you receive.

The reconciliation of the brothers is the climax of the Book of Genesis. All this family strife in just one book. And you thought your Christmas was difficult.

Is God to blame for some of this discord? After all God makes choices: *Hevel's sacrifice* is preferred to Cain's; Isaac is the heir of the promise not Ishmael; Jacob, for all his faults, is preferred to Esau. Joseph seems to be the pick of the brothers but it is Judah, the fourth son of the hated Leah who is ancestor to David. Not one is a first born son though this was an age when the elder son had the greater inheritance rights.

It is important to understand that God's choice brings responsibilities and pain. It is never an easy path to follow. And God's choice of one never means the rejection of the other or others. Cain decides on his action despite a clear warning, and still is protected by God after his crime. Ishmael is father to many nations. Esau is progenitor to Edom, a nation under God's protection. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out: "To be chosen does not mean that others are unchosen...The Torah is saying for all time to all humanity – not all are chosen for the rigours, spiritual and existential, of the Abrahamic covenant, but all are precious to God, each has his or her place in the scheme of things, each has his or her virtues, talents, gifts, and each is precious in the eyes of God."**

In today's Gospel we have another family upset. Jesus is at the threshold age between childhood and manhood. As a child his place was with the women, being mollycoddled; as a man his place was with the men, showing his worth. Hence the confusion. Where should he be? He knows. His place is in his Father's House. In the manner of teenagers the world over he cannot understand the fuss he has caused.

The all returns to the calm we expect of the holy household. He is again the model child. And all is still until the voice of the Baptist breaks the silence of five hundred years. A prophet's voice is again heard in the land, and Jesus is summoned from obscure Nazareth to fulfil his mission and teach all peoples to call God "Father" and be members of one family in him. As our second reading stated so clearly, "We are already the children of God".

*Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons; Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*, Eerdmann's, Grand Rapids, 2001.

**Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation, Genesis: The book of Beginnings*, Maggid, Jerusalem, 2009, p. 175,174.