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Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Those comforting words of Jesus would have had considerable appeal, some two thousand or so years before they were spoken, to a senior servant of Abraham’s household, sent on a long and uncertain quest to find a bride for his master’s son and heir.

Abraham has settled in Canaan (the modern day region of Palestine), a long way from his land of origin. He is now very old, his wife Sarah has died, and his son Isaac is now into his 30s and without a wife. This is a significant issue: God has promised that Abraham will have descendants “as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore”, and that “through his offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”¹

Abraham wants Isaac to have a wife; but it can’t just be any lass: Isaac is not free to marry a local Canaanite girl, nor is he allowed to travel abroad himself to search for a wife.²

Abraham commissions his senior servant for the task. It must have felt a rather daunting commission: a wearisome burden to bear perhaps.

He is dispatched on a journey of over 600 kilometres to the region of Haran (in what is Turkey today), through all manner of terrain and conditions.

Despite Abraham assuring him that he would not be found at fault if he fails in his quest, this is no casual errand, but is one filled with significance. Dare he risk disappointing his master?

He is being sent off through nations that are culturally different to his, into a foreign land to be among people who don’t know him, and who might not remember or respect his master – relatives of Abraham they may be, but how do they feel about

¹ Genesis 22:17, 18

² Genesis 24: 3, 5, 8

Abraham after all this time? And will they find the gifts he brings, extensive though they are, acceptable and sufficient?

And the ultimate outcome of the quest is by no means certain: after all, Abraham's relatives might reject the request; or perhaps there is no suitable woman to be found among them; or perhaps no woman from that clan will be willing to travel into the unknown to marry a complete stranger. While Abraham is full of faith and confidence in the God who has led him, spoken to him and sworn on oath to give him descendants, we don't know whether the servant shared this confidence. What we do know is that the servant doesn't address God in prayer as his personal Lord, but rather distantly as the God of his master Abraham.³

But, despite all this, the servant goes, and – as the selected verses in this morning's reading from Genesis 24 summarise for us – the servant's quest is successful: Rebekah, a great niece of Abraham, is pointed out by God and willingly agrees to enter into the marriage.

The servant, no doubt, felt a great sense of relief ... "rest", perhaps.

And the rest is, as they say, history.

But it is not mere history: it was pertinent in Jesus' day, two thousand years or so later; and it is pertinent to us here today another two thousand years on.

The beginnings of this relevance are hinted at in the remark one commentator makes about the quest of Abraham's servant: "On the success of this enterprise depended the separateness of the people of God, a necessary condition for developing a counter-culture that would reflect their walk with God."⁴

From Abraham, through his son Isaac, and on through Isaac's son Jacob (later given the name Israel) comes a special nation of people. The descendants of Israel in time find themselves enslaved in Egypt. Brought out of Egypt by God's saving power, they then wander in the wilderness for 40 years before being brought safely

³ Genesis 24:12, 27

⁴ Baldwin, *Genesis*, p.99

across the Jordan to inhabit the Promised Land, Canaan. While in the wilderness they are given the Law: the Ten Commandments handed down to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the more detailed prescriptions enshrined in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In being formed as people of the Law, these descendants of Abraham are made the distinctive people of God.

When we get to the New Testament we can be inclined to think “well that was then, this is now”, thinking that God’s work in and through his people Israel proved to be a failed plan, a plan that had to be replaced in Jesus. And, it is thought, the Old Testament Law was part of that failed plan and so becomes irrelevant.

This is exactly the sort of thinking that Paul is having to challenge in his letter to the church in Rome. Though from this morning’s piece from chapter 7 it is not immediately clear that this is what Paul is addressing. We either resonate with the anguish of futility in the battle with sin, or we resolutely see ourselves as outside of those who might identify with Paul’s words:

For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. ...

Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ...⁵

While we might find ourselves identifying with the inward struggle Paul describes, any reassurance that comes from his sharing this experience with us only gets us so far. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”⁶

Thankfully God has provided the solution, and it actually lies in behind Paul’s words in Romans 7 and it lies within a small and fragile nation of people he called to himself – the descendants of Isaac and Rebekah.⁷

Rather than Romans 7 being a purely personal reflection, it seems that Paul is using the “I” language as a rhetorical device; perhaps also alluding to well-known sayings

⁵ Romans 7:19, 21

⁶ Romans 7:24

⁷ The following follows closely Wright, *Twelve*, p.85; see also his *The Day the Revolution Began*, pp.282-288.

from pagan moralists about the weakness of the human will.⁸ And Paul is looking back, as a Christian, at Israel under the Law, the Torah. Israel was right to embrace and celebrate Torah: it is God's Law, it is holy and just and good. The Law was God's gift to Israel. But Israel is also still, in Paul's words, "in Adam". Israel, like all peoples, is innately sinful. The Law performs a good function in making Israel aware of sin. But it does not save Israel from sin. The existence of the Law cannot overthrow sin's power – this is the futile battle depicted in the passage we heard read. Paul's diagnosis is that Israel is wretched as a result.

But he doesn't stop with diagnosis. Still using the rhetorical "I" Paul sets out what the necessary treatment is:

Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!⁹

If we were to follow Paul's argument through into chapter 8, we would find that the Law's condemnation has in fact finally fallen on the spiritual power of Sin itself – not on the sinners – and that this condemnation has happened through the death of Jesus. The Law has enabled sin to be heaped up on Israel, so that in Israel's King and representative it could be destroyed.

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.¹⁰ (Romans 8:3-4)

The issue has not been with the Law: the problem has been with Sin – Sin that is common to all humankind, Jew and Gentile alike.

And it is in this problem, and in its solution in Jesus, that we find ourselves included; it is in this that we should be interested in and find relevant the Old Testament, including the story from long ago about how a suitable wife was found for Isaac.

⁸ Just who is the "I" in Romans 7 has occasioned a great deal of debate among Bible scholars and theologians. For summaries of the argument, see Stott, *Romans*, pp.198-201; Zieler, *Romans*, 189-195.

⁹ Romans 7:24

¹⁰ Romans 8:3-4

In Christ the “I” is no longer divided but united; no longer frustrated but fulfilled; no longer at odds with God’s will, but in conformity to it. God has done all this. All humans systems (“law”) have been and will be *incapable* of achieving this. It is only the Spirit through Christ that delivers humanity. As I noted a couple of weeks ago, those baptised “no longer live *in Sin*” and are no longer enslaved to sin and injustice.¹¹

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

To those listening to Jesus at the time, he was offering release from being forced to carry the burden or “yoke” of the law with all its regulations as detailed and amplified by the scribes and Pharisees. He was offering rest too for those facing the struggles, pressures and worries of everyday life. He was offering rest for those under the yoke of poverty or disease or captivity; rest for a people facing oppression from foreign overlords; rest from living idolatrous lives. This rest is the relationship with God, in the present and in the future; the relationship with God who holds all things and is working all for the good of those who love him. Taking the yoke of Jesus we enter into a personal relationship in which we relinquish control over to him. ¹²

Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Just in case we think that “rest” means that we can sit back and do nothing, we need to recognise that, like the servant, we have ongoing work to do as God works to accomplish his purpose for humanity and all creation. Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you”; the “yoke” is associated with work: a yoke was a bar that tethered two working animals together as they pulled a plough or turned a large and heavy millstone.

¹¹ Kyle Fever –slightly adapted.

¹² Osborne, *Matthew*, pp.441-443

While in the immediate context of Jesus and his audience, “yoke” implied the Law, we should not limit the application. We do well to remember that the law of Jesus includes love of God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength – in other words, with our *all*.

“Yoke” implies work. We are workers for the kingdom.

Our work will look different for different people – we all have different gifts and talents, capacity, opportunity, contexts, and passions – but all of us are to be engaged in God’s kingdom work, making his rest visible in the world, extending his rest to others, and proclaiming the hope of its future completion.

Abraham’s servant was entrusted with his master’s hugely important task, and he carried it out faithfully. We are servants of the kingdom; servants of the living, loving, God, who calls his servants friends and adopts them as his children, co-heirs with his son.

It is here, bearing this yoke, that we find true rest, because this is what we were truly made for.

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