

The most expensive bowl of lentils in the world

16 June 2017

Genesis 25:19-34

A disturbing trend in recent years has been the rise of truck shops. As the name suggests, these are mobile shops that operate out of trucks and sell everything from electronics to whiteware.

To the best of my knowledge, such businesses don't operate on the Kapiti Coast. And I am not surprised. They tend to ply their trade in less affluent communities, and use their smooth sales patter to sell their goods at prices that are usually far in excess of what they would be in retail stores, on high interest terms. Along with loan sharks offering so-called 'pay day loans', they seem to target beneficiaries and the working poor, and often entice them into making commitments that are really beyond their means.

I was reminded of these dodgy traders while I was reflecting on today's Older Testament Lesson from the Book of Genesis, which tells us the first instalment of the story of Esau and Isaac. This is not the first story of sibling rivalry in a dysfunctional family in the Bible, and nor is it the last. And I have always felt sorry for Esau, as he seemed to be quite hard done by. Later on, his twin brother Jacob would trick their father Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau. But on that occasion, Jacob would be cashing in on an event that occurs in today's reading, when Esau sells him his birthright for a bowl of lentils, or as it used to be popularly referred to as, a mess of pottage.

Jacob is revered by Jews as the third Patriarch of the Hebrews, after Esau's and his grandfather Abraham, and their father Isaac. But I have always struggled with how Jacob is portrayed more favourably

in scripture than Esau is. Our text tells us that their mother Rebekah was told by the Lord that the elder would serve the younger, and Jacob's actions could be seen as fulfilling prophecy, especially if he were God's elect. But could we really expect a Patriarch and father of Israel to be portrayed in anything other than a favourable light in the Hebrew Scriptures?

Esau on the other hand is not presented in a very favourable light at all. In today's reading we are told, "Esau despised his birthright".¹ "Despised" is a pretty strong word, but that is how the original Hebrew text is perhaps best translated into English. Esau is portrayed as being sinful and rebellious in other Jewish literature, and condemnation of Esau and his actions continues through into the Newer Testament; the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says, "See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal."²

So why would Esau sell something as precious as his birthright for a bowl of lentils? Was he really was starving, and feeling like he was about to die. Surely nobody would feel that hungry after a night of unsuccessful hunting. Or would they?

I would like to suggest what I consider to be a more reasonable and realistic explanation for Esau's behaviour than despising his birthright. According to the Jewish writings known as the Talmud, the deal between Esau and Isaac took place immediately after the death of their grandfather Abraham, and they would have been about 15 at the time. So could the real reason for Esau selling his birthright be as simple as a hungry teenage boy putting his next meal ahead of everything else?

Scientists now know that the part of the brain that controls rational decision making is not fully developed until one's twenties, which explains why teenagers can be prone to making rash decisions without fully considering the consequences. Any of you here who have or have had teenagers will know two things. Teenagers can and do act rashly. And teenagers, especially boys it would seem, can have unbelievable appetites.

So while this may explain Esau's actions, we should seek to discern what God may be telling us through this story today. And I would suggest there are lessons for us in the less than exemplary behaviours of both Esau and Isaac.

Despite there being a seeming tendency to excuse his actions, I say Jacob did behave badly. He took advantage of Esau's hunger, and in his shrewdness obtained something for himself whose value he understood, but his brother did not seem to fully appreciate.

And I was a little disturbed when I recently read a sermon by a conservative American preacher that essentially argued that the real message of the story of Esau and Isaac was that the poor have no right to gripe about unfortunate situations they get themselves into and should not be complaining about their plight.

I find this view abhorrent. I have already spoken of truck shops and loan sharks that target the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities and I would argue there needs to be more proactive protection of those who are most likely to be exploited, along with

support and budgeting advice for those who are most likely to be targeted, to help them make better financial informed decisions.

Esau may not have understood the full implications of what he was doing, but he still sold his birthright. And I think we are in danger of doing the same.

I believe it is our calling to work toward the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace here on earth, which includes not just showing Christ-like love and compassion to all who are created in God's image, but taking good care of God's creation that we have been entrusted with.

Like many people, I am seriously concerned about the future of our planet and all life that is on it. Climate change has potentially catastrophic consequences for all life on earth, and I would argue it is thoroughly reckless to claim there is no human causation of climate change, like some do.

Then there is pollution. Our addiction to plastic is especially worrying; it is getting into to the sea and into the food chain, and scientists have estimated that by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish in the oceans.

And if you have ever seen films like *Soylent Green*, you will be all too aware that living on a planet that humans have ruined is a very frightening prospect indeed.

When we fail to take care of the earth God have given, we too are despising our birthright.

And if we don't do anything about it, the consequences for us will be far greater than they were for Esau, when he rashly purchased the most expensive bowl of lentils in the world.

Darryl Ward

16 July 2017

<http://theword.tk>

¹ Genesis 19:34b

² Hebrew 12:16