

Looking Ahead

Genesis 48-50

Genesis 50:15-26, Hebrews 11:17-22, Luke 1:67-79

"History will teach us nothing." So sang Sting on his 1986 album, "Nothing like the Sun." In the liner notes of the album he recalls saying this to his history teacher at school. Not surprisingly he failed history. In the song he sings that the past has to be thrown away so that we can look ahead with hope.

There have been plenty of others who have not had a lot of time for history. Edward Gibbon wrote "History is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." But perhaps most pungently Henry Ford famously proclaimed "History is bunk." What matters is progress, looking ahead.

Such folk would probably not be overly impressed with what we have been doing in church for the past few months where we have been looking back a long way in history, around 4000 years. However as we come to the end of Genesis and look back over all we have learnt we will see that most respectfully we must disagree with those quoted above. We certainly have seen a history that has been full of crimes, follies and misfortunes of humanity. There certainly has been a cyclic element to the story, even as Genesis concludes one last deception in Jacob's family is recounted. But there is also much to learn.

Today we will remind ourselves how this history teaches us about blessing, about faith and about the purpose of God's plans. We do not look ahead by throwing away the past but seeing all that God has done so that we can look ahead in true faith and hope. We look back so we can have clarity as we look forward.

To do this we need at the end of Genesis to see what has happened to the promises God made to Abraham, then to Isaac and Jacob, promises of blessing, promises of descendants, of land and finally of blessing to the world.

BLESSED BY GOD

We are reminded of these promises by Jacob on his death bed. Joseph brings his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim to their dying grandfather who rallies and he looks back saying:

'God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, ⁴and said to me, "I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.'" (Gen 48:3-4)

Jacob, the man who grasped for blessing for so much of his life, recognises at its end that he has been blessed by God. Later he will recognise the wonder of seeing Joseph and his sons, and even the start of the promise of the land being fulfilled. Jacob understands that he has been blessed.

It is worth stopping every now and then and looking back to "count our blessings, naming them one by one" for it probably will surprise us what the Lord has done. This is especially so in the context of the book of Genesis which starts with God's wonderful creation, which is all around us. This will help remind us that God's desire is to bless us and, as we looked at last week, help us to be optimistic. Jacob is good model for us here, history can teach us of God's blessing.

But Jacob understands that blessing is something that has to be passed on and so he blesses his two grandsons after adopting them as his own, essentially giving Joseph a double inheritance. Jacob's favouritism dies hard, but Joseph has probably deserved it by now.

Joseph puts his boys in their correct birth order in front of his almost blind father so he can bless them, but Joseph crosses his hands over so that his right hand is on Ephraim's head and blesses Joseph saying

"May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm--may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." (see Genesis 48:11-19, NIV)

Joseph in some exasperation tries to put the right hand on the correct head, but Jacob says that Manassah will also be blessed, but the younger will be the greater.

This passage reminds us of two very strong themes in Genesis. Firstly that blessing does not go along the lines that we may expect. There is a wonderfully human touch here as Joseph tries to correct what his dim sighted father is doing, so that the older is blessed. But Jacob knows what he is doing. Throughout Genesis it has not been the eldest that has been the holder of the blessing. Jacob himself was the youngest, Joseph was not the oldest and so on. Blessing does not come from a privileged position, it is not something that can be presumed.

Rather, as this passage also reminds us, blessing comes through the action of God. It is God that has brought Jacob his blessing and so it is to the shepherd God of his fathers that he prays for the boys.

If this history was to teach later generations anything it is that God's blessing cannot be presumed upon, it remains God's to give. It is not something that is a human right. The right attitude toward God is one of humble thanks, there is no place for arrogance, a lesson God's people have needed to learn again and again throughout history.

LAND – FAITH AND HOPE

Jacob could give thanks to God because God had promised him blessing, tick, and a great number of descendants, and with a family of 70 safe in Egypt that promise is well on its way to being fulfilled as well.

But there was another promise, the promise of the land that they had just left. And as the great Bard Meatloaf sang "Two out of three ain't bad." Perhaps Jacob and his family could have taken that line, God has blessed us, God has given us descendants, he hasn't come through with the land but two out of three ain't bad. Not a bit of it. A very strong feature in these final chapters of Genesis is the looking forward to returning to the Land.

Twice Jacob instructs his sons to make sure he is buried in the family tomb in Canaan.

Then he gave them these instructions: "I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites." When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people. (Genesis 49:29-33, NIV).

Jacob is determined to be buried not just with other members of the family but in the land that will one day belong to his ongoing family. It is not just an act of tradition but an act of faith. God will keep his word, the land will be theirs, that is where he should be, where he has to be buried.

Joseph makes sure that this happens and Jacob is given the most wonderful of funerals. Not to be out done as we heard Joseph shows the same faith, he is to be buried in the land promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jacob and Joseph were both looking forward in faith. They were trusting in God's promise, they lived and died in faith. And it is a faith we are to emulate.

We are often encouraged to live in faith and it is right to do so. Knowing God's purposes has to be worked out in our lives, our decisions should be made on the basis of God's promises and I pray that our ministry will continue to help people to live by faith.

But I find it particularly interesting that Jacob and Joseph expressly died in faith, they make requests about their bones, their funeral and what it means, which meant not only what their hope meant to them but also clearly spoke to their family of their faith in God's promises. Have we thought about what dying in faith means. It was a real privilege to participate in Bill Jolly's funeral on Monday (November 13) which clearly proclaimed to his family and friends the faith in which he died.

BLESSING TO THE WORLD

The book of Genesis then ends with people looking forward to God keeping his promises, but there is one more promise, the promise of blessing to all nations. There has been a partial fulfilment as many people have been saved through the wisdom of Joseph but as readers we are looking for more. Genesis started with the wonder of creation and the disaster of the fall, we are looking for the restoration of humanity, we are looking for the one who will bring this blessing.

We have been on the lookout since Genesis 3:15 where it is promised that a descendant of Eve will bruise the serpent's head. Through all the genealogies we have looked expectantly. We may have thought that the long promised son of Abraham would be the one but we were disappointed. We might have expected Joseph to be the one but even he doesn't seem good enough. In the midst of Jacob's final blessing of his children, although some of them seem to be more told off than blessed, we read of what he says to Judah.

"Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness-- who dares to rouse him? The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. (Genesis 49:8-10, NIV).

Much of what is said here is rather obscure but one thing is plain, this is to be the line through which "the one" was to come.

Throughout the Old Testament the truth of what Jacob says about his sons comes to pass and it is from Judah that the great leaders do come, David is of Judah, Solomon is of Judah. But none of them seem great enough to fulfil this promise despite some great kingdoms.

Eventually the house of Judah turns from God and so is punished but this promise is not lost sight of. Ezekiel picks up this theme in the Babylonian exile about the line of kings from Judah "this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs; to him I will give it.' (Ezekiel 21:26-27, NIV).

As the Old Testament ends we are still waiting for the one, then a child is born in Bethlehem. The one is of course Jesus, he is the one who rightfully has the sceptre and the throne and by his resurrection as Ephesians puts it he is far above all other rulers and authority. He is the one to whom the nations owe their allegiance and their obedience, he is the one who will bring blessing to the world and restore humanity.

Genesis then not only shows our forefathers in the faith looking forward to the land, it helps us look forward to Jesus. The Joseph story has shown us how God can work in history, overruling human activity, evil and good and here we see where that

plan is going, all of God's plans are focussed on Jesus the one who is the great king, the one in whom the nations will be blessed, the one in whom all the promises of God are fulfilled.

History then is not bunk without it our view of God is shrunk. Genesis then teaches us ultimately that history is HIStory. Our Creator God who is the cause of history is working his plans to save the world through Jesus in history, till all see that it is HIStory. It is only because of this that we can look ahead with any confidence for God is control, the one has come and will return.

But also our view of our faith in our world is shrunk with out a biblical view of history. History helps us as individuals, assuring us of God's plans of blessing and salvation which are ours in Christ. But the fact that it is history forces us to think outside ourselves. Our faith is not only about our own blessing, our own salvation, it concerns the Christ, the long promised one who is to be King of the nations who will bring blessing to the world. If it is HIStory then it must impact how we think about our world and the other stories we hear in our media.

As we move from Genesis to Christ the King, Advent and Christmas, looking at the whole story will help us not to make our faith about our story. Looking back will encourage us not only to look forward but to look around and seek to bring HIStory, this story of God who is working for blessing to a world that so desperately needs it, and be agents of blessing in this story.