

THE STORY OF ESAU AND JACOB

The story of Esau and Jacob presents to us one of the best Old Testament stories on reconciliation. (Joseph and his brothers is another one.) For the purpose of reflection let us choose four moments from this story.

1. Esau sells the right of his birth as first born to his brother Jacob.

Gen.25:29-34

29 Once when Jacob was making a stew, Esau came back from the country and he was hungry; 30 and he said to Jacob, "Let me have some of that red stew, for I am hungry." That is why he was also called Edom. 31 Jacob said, "First sell me your right as the firstborn." 32 Esau said, "Since I am to die soon, what good is my right as the firstborn to me?" 33 Then Jacob said, "Give me your oath first." So he swore to him and sold his firstborn right to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave him bread and the lentil stew. Esau ate and drank and then got up and went his way. So it was that Esau thought nothing of his right as the firstborn.

Let us take time reflect on this incident. Esau sells his first born right for a bowl of stew. Is he really serious? Why can't Jacob share his food with his brother without his brother having to exchange it for his right of the first born? Who is right, who is wrong we'll not judge but we follow the story.

2. Jacob steals the last blessing from his father.

Gen.27:1-45

27 1 When Isaac was old and his eyes so weak that he could no longer see, he called Esau, his older son, and said to him, "My son." "Here I am," he answered. 2 Isaac continued, "You see I am old and I don't know when I shall die; 3 so take your weapons, your bow and arrow, go out into the country and hunt some game for me. 4 Then prepare some of the savory food I like and bring it to me so that I may eat and give you my blessing before I die."

5 Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau went into the country to hunt game and bring it back, 6 Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father saying to your brother Esau: 7 'Bring me some game and prepare food for me that I may eat and bless you before Yahweh before I die.' 8 Now my son, listen and do what I command you. 9 Go to the flock and bring me two fine kids so that I can prepare for your father the food that he likes. 10 You will bring it to your father and he will eat it and give you his blessing before he dies."

11 Jacob said to Rebekah, "My brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. 12 Perhaps my father will feel me and I will seem to be tricking him and so bring a curse on myself instead of a blessing." 13 But his mother said, "Let the curse fall on me, my son! Only do what I tell you; go and get the kids for me." 14 So he went and got them and took them to his mother to prepare food that his father liked. 15 Then Rebekah took the best clothes of her elder son Esau that she had in the house and put them on Jacob, her younger son. 16 With the goatskin she covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck, 17 and she handed to him the bread and food she had prepared.

18 He went to his father and said, "Father!" He answered, "Yes, my son, who is it?" 19 and Jacob said to his father, "It is Esau, your firstborn; I have done what you told me to do. Come, sit up and eat my game so that you may give me your blessing." 20 Isaac said, "How quick you have been my son!" Jacob said, "Yahweh, your God, guided me." 21 Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near and let me feel you, my son, and know that it is you, Esau my son, or not."

22 When Jacob drew near to Isaac, his father felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau." 23 He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like the hands of Esau his brother and so he blessed him. 24 He asked, "Are you really my son Esau?" and Jacob answered, "I am." 25 Isaac said, "Bring me some of your game, my son, so that I may eat and give you my blessing." So Jacob brought it to him and he ate. And he brought him wine and he drank. 26 Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." 27 So Jacob came near and kissed him.

Isaac then caught the smell of his clothes and blessed him, saying,

"The smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed. 28 May God give you of the dew of heaven; and of the richness of the earth; and abundance of grain and wine. 29 Let peoples serve you and nations bow down before you. Be lord over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone that curses you and blessed be everyone that blesses you!"

30 When Isaac had finished blessing him and Jacob had just left Isaac's room, Esau came in from hunting. 31 He also prepared food and brought it to his father and said to him, "Father, sit up and eat the game your son has prepared, so that you may give me your blessing." 32 Isaac said, "Who are you?" "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." 33 Isaac trembled violently and said, "Who was it then that

hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it all before you came and I blessed him and he will be blessed."

34 On hearing his father's words, Esau gave a loud and bitter cry and said, "Bless me, too, father." 35 But Isaac said, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." 36 Esau said, "Is it because he is called Jacob that he has supplanted me twice? First he took my birthright and now he has taken my blessing." Then he asked, "Haven't you kept a blessing for me?" 37 Isaac answered Esau, "I have made him your lord. I have given him all his brothers as servants; I have provided him with grain and wine. What can I do for you, my son?"

38 Esau said to his father, "Have you only one blessing? Father, bless me, too." Then Esau wept aloud. 39 Isaac then gave him this answer, "Your dwelling place shall be far away from the richness of the earth, away from the dew of heaven above. 40 You shall live by your sword, and you shall serve your brother; but when you win your freedom you will throw off his yoke from your neck."

41 Now Esau continued to hate his brother because of the blessing his father had given him and he thought to himself, "The time of mourning for my father is near; I shall then kill my brother Jacob." 42 When Rebekah was told what her elder son had said, she sent and called her younger son, Jacob, and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the thought of killing you. 43 Now my son, listen to me and flee to Laban, my brother, in Haran. 44 You will stay with him for a time 45 until your brother's fury has cooled; and when he has forgotten his anger and what you did to him, I will send someone to bring you back. Why should I lose both of you on the same day?"

Issac has come to the end of his life. It is time to give his blessing to the first born. He calls his first born Esau to receive the blessing. But with the help of the mother Jacob cheats his father and receives the blessing. When Esau comes for it, it is too late. The situation is irreversible. He laments. He pleads with his father to have another blessing. But it does not happen that way. Esau feel wounded. He is angry with the brother to the extent of desiring to kill him. Meanwhile, Jacob is saved by his mother. He escapes to the land of his uncle.

Let us look at the way Jacob behaves. Can his action be justified by the fact that Esau sold his first born right to Jacob? How do we see the action of the mother who favours one son over the other? Let us look at the situation of Esau; his disappointment, his woundedness and the desire for revenge. Can we say it is his

own fault and he deserves it? Jacob has no other choice except to run away to save his life and he does it, once again under the directions received from the mother.

In Haran he serves his uncle, marries his daughters, get many children, accumulates wealth and now wants to return to his own land. He has to go back to the land where his brother is waiting to kill him. He wants to be received by his brother but he knows it is not going to be easy. He makes plans for it. He sends messengers to announce that he is arriving.

3. Jacob prepares himself to meet his brother Esau



Gen. 32:5-31

5 Jacob sent Esau this message, "I have been staying with Laban until now. I have oxen, asses, flocks, men-servants and maidservants. I have sent to tell you this, my lord, that you may receive me kindly."

6 The messenger returned and said to Jacob, "We went to your brother Esau and he is already coming to meet you with four hundred men."

7 Jacob was full of fear and distress. He then divided the people with him and the flocks, the herds and camels into two camps, 8 thinking, "If Esau attacks one camp, the other will escape."

9 And Jacob said, "God of my father Abraham and my father Isaac, Yahweh, who said to me: 'Return to your country, to your father's land, and I will make you prosper,' 10 I am unworthy of the kindness and faithfulness you have shown to me, for with only my staff I crossed the Jordan and now I have enough to form two companies. 11 Deliver me from the hands of my brother Esau for I am afraid lest he come and kill us all, even the mothers and their children. 12 Yet it was you who said: I will be good to you and make your descendants like the sand on the seashore, so many that they cannot be counted." 13 So Jacob spent the night there.

Then he took what he had with him, a present for his brother Esau: 14 two hundred she-goats, and twenty he-goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty camels in milk and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty she-asses and ten male donkeys. 16 He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, "Go ahead of me and leave a space between each herd." 17 He instructed the leader, "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'To whom do you belong? And where are you going? Who is the owner of the animals you are driving?' 18 Then you shall say: They belong to your servant Jacob. It is a present he is sending to my lord Esau. He himself is coming along behind us!"

19 Jacob ordered the second and third servants and all who were following the herds in the same way, "That is what you shall say to Esau when you meet him: 20 Your servant Jacob is following!" For he thought to himself, "I may pacify him with the present I sent ahead, so that when I meet him face to face, he may perhaps receive me kindly." 21 So the present went ahead of him, but he himself spent that night in the camp.

- 22 That same night Jacob got up and taking his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons, crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream and likewise everything he had. 24 And Jacob was left alone.

Then a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not get the better of Jacob, he struck him in the socket of his hip and dislocated it as he wrestled with him.

26 The man said, "Let me go, for day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you have given me your blessing." 27 The man then said, "What is your name?" "Jacob" was the reply. 28 He answered, "You will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have been strong-with-God as you have been with men and have prevailed."

29 Then Jacob asked him, "What is your name?" He answered, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "I have seen God face to face and survived." 31 The sun rose as he passed through Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob is afraid to meet his brother Esau. He send messenger before him and they come back to tell him that Esau is coming towards him with four hundred men. Jacob fears an attack. He has to protect himself, his wives and children. He separates them and the animals in two camps. In case, one camp is attacked the

others will have time to escape. Jacob has enough reasons to fear his brother. The wrong he had done was serious and he can expect revenge even after many years have passed. He turns to God and prays for protection. He is afraid to move forward. He plans to win over the brother by sending him gifts. He sends the gifts with his servants and gives the strict instructions on what to say. They were to tell Esau that the wealth “belongs to your servant Jacob. It is a present he is sending to my lord Esau. He himself is coming along behind us!” Jacob does not call himself “brother” but “servant” because he feels that he is not worthy of that title. He send the gifts but he stays back. Later in the night he make his wives and children with all the rest, cross the stream. Still he does not want to move; he remains alone where he was. There he faces himself. The struggle with the stranger can be a deep experience of God where his fear of meeting the brother and the desire to make peace with him were reconciled. The dislocated hip can be a symbol of his vulnerability that he was feeling at the moment when he was going towards his brother. The blessing he receives show that he is reconciled with himself before going to reconcile with his brother. Now he moves limping.

4. The meeting of Esau and Jacob



Gen.33:1-15

33 1 Jacob looked up and saw that Esau was coming with four hundred men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. 2 He then put the maidservants in

front with their children, then Leah with her children and Rachel and Joseph last of all. 3 He himself went on before them and bowed to the ground seven times until he came near his brother.

4 Esau ran to meet him, took him in his arms, kissed him; and both wept. 5 Esau looked up and seeing the women and the children said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob replied, "They are the children God has given to your servant."

6 Then the servants and their children went forward and bowed down. 7 Leah with her children likewise advanced and bowed, and lastly Joseph and Rachel went forward and bowed.

8 Esau said, "What is the meaning of all this company I have met?" Jacob replied, "It is to win your favor." 9 Esau answered, "Brother, I have plenty; keep what you have for yourself." 10 Jacob said, "But, no, please! Accept the gift I offer, for I came to you as to God, and you received me kindly. 11 So accept the gift I have brought you, for God has dealt generously with me and I have plenty." And so much did Jacob insist that Esau accepted the gift.

12 Esau then said, "Let us be on our way. I will lead you." 13 But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are not strong, and besides I must think of the ewes with lambs and the cows that have calves and if they are driven too hard, even for one day, all the flocks will die. 14 Let it please my lord to go ahead of me while I move on slowly at the pace of the cattle I'm driving and that of the children, until I reach my lord at Seir." 15 Esau said, "At least let me leave with you some of my men." Jacob replied, "Why? All I want is to keep your friendship."

Jacob is afraid. He puts his wife and children behind him for their safety. He bows down seven times before he reaches his brother. What Jacob expects is an attack. But it is not so with Esau.

Esau ran to meet him,
took him in his arms,
kissed him;
and both wept.

Esau welcomes not only his brother but also his wives and children. He does not want any gifts from his brother. What he has is enough for him. He wants his brother to keep for himself what he has. What a contrast from the moment when Esau had to sell his first born right to get a bowl of stew from the brother. Those moments are not remembered. What he sees now is his brother. Jacob pleads with Esau to accept the gifts. He accepts them not because he needed them but because he wanted to please the brother.

Esau wants to move together. But it is not possible with small children and small animals. Jacob has to walk at a different rhythm. Esau is not demanding. He leaves the brother to make his own journey. He only wants to leave some of his men with the brother, but all that Jacob needs is the friendship his brother.

Once you have reflected on this story go back to the parable of the prodigal son and see the parallels. (Lk.15:11-32)

Some questions for personal reflection:

- What does this story say to you today?
- After the separation of the two brothers the Bible tell us what Jacob was living. What do you think Esau was living? What would have been the process that Esau had gone through after being deceived by his own brother? We cannot know the exact details. But from the way he welcomed the brother we can imagine what that process could have been.
- As we saw in the reflection on the biblical jubilee year, jubilee is a time for freeing ourselves and freeing others. How does this story inspire us to do it?