

We swim in such a fascinating culture where we seldom see the assumptions we live by. Reading the stories of the Patriarch and Matriarchs can really open our eyes to a different way of doing things. I'm not saying we should adopt all of the practices of 4 millennia ago. The story of Isaac and Rebekah is fascinating because there are some very different assumptions in the background

1. Abraham makes a plan for his son Isaac. Now, we are not all going to marry, so I'm not just going to talk about marriage. But we all have a father and a mother – biological, adoptive, foster, love mother, God father, some wonderfully engaged, some absent, some mercifully far away, and for some of us, parents who have passed away.

Today I want to ask about your parent's plan for you: do you know what your father and mother (at their best) wanted for you? We live in a culture where it is all about self-determination, freedom, self-expression – I did it my way. But "my way" is heavily influenced by our media, social media and the companies behind these. We hardly notice how pervasive this 'self-fulfilment' message is. Parents often say – I just want my children to find their own way, to be happy. But what if God had a different plan. What if God intended that the person who knows you best in the world, and has known you the longest time; what if God's intention was for that person to do some gentle guiding? That's a big responsibility – and a big opportunity. I've sometimes been asked; "when do you offer your kids or brother, or cousin advice?" There is a simple answer, when they ask. We all know stories of rigid expectations that can crush a person. But, what if God intended that parents should speak positive guidance into our lives. If you asked, what would they say?

I'm talking to adults. What do you think your parents want to say to you at this stage in your life? At their best, if they were operating like the godly role-models they were intended to be. What would they be saying to you today?

And parents, mentors, teachers what positive words can you speak into a younger person's life this week, what can you see in them that they might not be able to see in themselves?

I remember Jono saying about his new church, it's nice when adults come up and say hi and are interested, it's great when someone asks you to lunch.

Advanced in age, Abraham wished to set up his son for success. He desired to find a wife for Isaac. Now there is a challenge here that I think we need to recognise. Abraham didn't want his son to marry a Canaanite girl, but someone from his own background. Our world has been plagued with the results of racial discrimination. The key factor in the time of the Patriarchs was race tended to be synonymous with religion. What Abraham wanted to avoid was the God's of the Canaanites. In the New Testament Paul teaches that in Christ there is no Greek or Jew and so I believe Christian people should feel free to marry someone of any race. But here's the rub, what should we say now about a partnership with someone of a different faith, what about someone who is a Hindu, a Muslim or an Atheist.

In today's progressive culture surely we can marry across religious lines, or should we? But this was a major concern for Abraham, he wanted Isaac to marry someone who would share his religion. Is that true for today? I think this story raises really important questions for us, and not just about marriage but also other partnerships. In 2 Corinthians 6.14 Paul uses the image of two oxen working together and warns his fellow Christians not to be unequally yoked.

I want to raise a flag about the idea of marrying someone of another religion. Of course lots of Christians marry people of other faiths and make it work. And of course being a disapproving parent can destroy families. I also know many Christian women who have married non-Christian husbands. But I want to raise a flag. I want to suggest three reasons that it is good to marry someone of the same faith:

1. Because you won't change them.
2. Because you will share some of the same values about fundamental things.
3. Because for a Christian life is about being on mission.

1. I think a lot of people go into relationships thinking that they can change the other person. At one level we all change all the time, but when someone sets out to change you they are seldom successful. It's perhaps easier to change behaviours than fundamental beliefs. I'm not sure also whether it isn't a little dishonest going into a marriage thinking I will change your faith? Don't be naive, if you are going to marry someone of a different faith – be open eyed and realistic that they will likely stay that religion for life.

2. Our religion should be a reflection not just of our surface behaviour but also of our fundamental beliefs. What is our attitude towards wealth, towards service, towards gendered roles, towards holidays and children and family? Now of course these are things we should discuss with any marriage partner, and a business partner. But our religion should be a reflection of our basic values. When we share these in common it can make a relationship work better. And I have read about how being married to a person of another religion can sometime help you actually understand your own religion better. My question would be do you really understand each other's religion. And when it comes to kids you need to be crystal clear about how they will be raised and in which country?

3. Finally for a Christian life is not just about work and family and leisure, our whole life is meant to be an act of worship following Jesus. I believe that God calls men and women to work together in all that we do to contribute to his Kingdom. Again perhaps you can be fully engaged in worshipping and following Jesus why married to a person of another faith, but will they allow you to pursue your faith?

Now if you can make a mature response to these 3 objections then I wouldn't stand in your way of marrying someone who does not share your faith, but be mindful that you will be influenced as much as you influence. In the gospels there is reference to the 'man of peace', someone who is not yet a believer but is neither hostile, of course we need to respect such people. In fact, I have enjoyed conversations with Muslim leaders, because we understand our differences and know that we are both committed to a code, a law, a way of living. And yes there are many good things that people of different faiths can do together. But this story makes me think.

A small tangent. I am amazed at how wonderfully God has made family and group systems, and how he has given us the ability to observe and learn about them. I remember reading about family systems many years ago and how you can understand a family or a group using two scales. A cohesion scale from disengaged at one end to enmeshed at the other end. And a scale is of adaptability from chaotic at one end to rigidly at the other end. I have found this tool really helpful to help families understand their expectations and behaviours. It's very useful to realise different families, have different expectations, but also that a healthy family system might move around.

Here's an example from David Olsen's 1999 article *Empirical Approaches to Family Assessment*. This chart follows the story of Peter, who age 53 had a heart attack. His wife, Martha, was a homemaker and they had three teenagers living at home, one of whom was attending college. They started off being flexibly separated, a bit less connected, and doing their own things – but still in relationship. Dad has heart attack and the family comes very close together, but it's chaotic at first; then after a while the family while still very connected, develop quite strong patterns to help manage and cope, and then again as time goes on, maybe the kids go back to their interests and activities, and the pattern is less rigid but still structurally connected. Young couples tend to be very close but very flexible – shall we go to Papamoa for a burger;

different to young families who live for settled bed-time routines, who are different to teenage and young adult families, who are different to older couples. Difference can be healthy, flats can be like this too, this is a good model to help you reflect on where you are as a family and perhaps what you miss? Abraham knew what he wanted for Isaac and he got it.

The second thing that this story does is reflect the wonderful spiritual life of this unnamed servant.

In the part we haven't read he is tasked by Abraham to find a wife for Isaac and he is clearly honourable, he will do his best but he also asks, what if I cannot achieve the goal? And Abraham tells him, if he cannot then he is released from his vow. A man of integrity. He heads off on this task, and then approaching the Well he asks God to help him in this discernment. His prayer is detailed and expectant, he prays for success and sets out a little test that he has devised. He then says to God if you will do this then I know that you are showing kindness to my master.

What's exciting is that even as he is praying for guidance and for success and for discernment, Rebekah turns up. And she does everything he asks, even getting ahead of him. She gives him a drink and offers to water the camels. That's not a small task, she is a worker and hospitable, and not afraid of strangers. She even runs back to the well to get more water. Now in verse 21 the servant watches her carefully, in fact watches her prayerfully, is this the one? Then he asks who she is and whether he can stay.

Now Rebekah is described as very beautiful, of marriageable age, and single; but these are not the only things that matter to the servant, she is hospitable and kind, and on top of that she is a relative.

Now watch the servant's behaviour again, v 26, he worships, he bows down and praised God. We can all be guilty of asking for God's help and then forgetting to praise God when the help comes through.

Now the servant tells Laban the whole story, and he phrases it as a God story, so much so that at the end of the telling Laban says this is from the lord, and agrees at first to Rebekah going. Again the servant worships God, v 52. However, when everyone gets home there is a caution and mother and brother says let's wait a few days – this is a good caution, and even better, the family ask Rebekah what she wants to do, and she is brave, she recognises God's hand in this and agrees to Go.

I encourage you to read this story through and look at the spirituality of this servant, he's not the boss, but the boss's ways have rubbed off on him. Oh that our good points would rub off on those that work with us or work for us. One could almost say that Abraham had established a positive spiritual culture in his workplace and his employees had picked it up. What culture are you developing? Do you pray before decisions? Do you seek signs – not weird ones – but fitting signs from God before going ahead with things?

Finally, Rebekah, she's a gem. She is out there getting water, a traditional chore, but she notices a stranger and she extends hospitality to him. Hospitality is a hallmark of Abraham. Not only does Rebekah do what she is asked, she goes beyond. I don't think these are miraculous one off signs, and think Rebekah's acceptance comes from a life time of small graces, which have prepared her to be the mother of the nation. And mother of the nation she is, she will in time privilege Jacob over Esau, she will look after the trickster and prepare him so that he is ready to become Israel.

Let's go through the story. The servant sees her and asks for a drink. She gladly consents, then before he asks she offers to run back to the spring and get water for his camels. – Until they have finished drinking, I would suspect the camels will want a fair bit of water and she is up for it.

The servant watches? What does he watch for? When the camels had finished drinking. So he watches whether she completes what she offered. The verse suggests that the camel are full, this might have taken some time, she didn't just give them one drink each, she waters the camels until they are full.

Then she is gifted some jewellery, but is equally happy to extend her homes hospitality. Recently I travelled down to Dunedin with Jono, my brother put us up the first night, the second night we stayed in a flat in Christchurch with one of Jono's mates who is flatting with Cate Bridgman, we were happy to sleep on the floor but Cate gave up her room for us. The next night I managed to lock us out of Jono's room, the landlord hadn't given us the right key, and another friend immediately offered us a bed for the night. I felt like God had gone before us making a way. Through the hospitality of my sister-in-law Anne, and then Cate and finally my friend Rachel. Each had less and less notice, but each blessed us.

Finally, Rebekah is asked will she go with this man, who appears to have come on a mission from God and she goes. When Rebekah meets Isaac he is out in the field meditating and they look up at each other. And Rebekah and Isaac take over the story from Abraham and Sarah. And God's story has a new mother.

Well it's a simple story about signs and discernment.

Firstly, it is a story that challenges, should we enter into marriages and business partnerships with those not of our faith? Perhaps you will answer yes, but I hope you will do some discerning first.

It is a story that speaks to me about living our lives seeking God's way. I love the way that the servant set out his plan to God, he gives God a way to show him what to do. And there is no criticism, it's not a bizarre showy sign, but it is evidence that God does want to guide us.

Thirdly it is a story about simple hospitality.