

Introduction

I've titled my talk this morning **GMO**. GMO? Rod had some helpful suggestions at the start of the service:

- Great
- and Meaningful Opportunity
- God,
- Me, Others
- Go!
- Move On!
- Get Me
- Outahere!

But clearly, we are considering **GMO - Genetically Modified Organisms**. It's been a topic of research, anticipation and concern for decades, with articles appearing from time to time about such things as, *"plans to feed Australian dairy cows genetically modified rye grass designed to boost milk production."*

These reports often spark concern and bring responses from various organisations. Concerned farmers appear in the news; Spokespersons will note, *"the role of GM grasses in the food chain is 'a sleeping giant.' We'll have humans consuming milk from cows that have been consuming genetically modified material. We just don't know what effects we might have to deal with in the future."*

And the debate continues about these Genetically Modified Organisms, defined as, *"any living organism that possesses a novel combination of genetic material obtained through the use of modern biotechnology. Genetic modification involves the mutation, insertion, or deletion of genes. Inserted genes usually come from a different species"*.

So with this concern over GMOs, what are we to make of today's reading with Jacob getting into the genetic modification of livestock millennia ago; What's with this genetic engineering of sheep and goats, even without 'modern biotechnology?'

There is no mention of appropriate government approvals, and certainly it's being done without the approval of his uncle / father-in-law, Laban. And what about the labelling of the meat and wool and milk of these sheep and goats? Is that going to follow the approved standard? This is untested scientific territory and once you start messing around with genes, anything might be happening, particularly with this rather dubious technique of peeling the bark off branches.

As we have seen in recent weeks, a few unusual things have happened in Jacob's story thus far, but this one has goes pretty high up there on the strangeness scale. So what's going on here? What do GMOs, Genetically Modified Organisms, have to teach us? In the midst of those GMOs, I trust we will see another GMO: **God's Modus Operandi** (Mode of Operation).

Prayer

Lord God, There sure are some unusual stories in the Bible and this ranks right up there with the strangest. So please give me clarity in my thought and in my speaking, speak to us all through your Word and by your Spirit and that we all will grow in our knowledge and love of you. Help us through these Genetically Modified Organisms to see something of your Modus Operandi. Help us see Jesus.
Amen

Introduction - Continued

So what is God's Modus Operandi in this passage? I want to suggest to you that we see God's Modus Operandi is to bring **blessing**.

But it hasn't been all beer and skittles for Jacob though, has it? He's been working for Laban for 14 years paying the 'bride price' for Laban's two daughters - Leah and Rachel. And as we saw last week it wasn't all 'happy families.' The bigamous marriage has had its share of tensions, and along the way, 11 sons and at least one daughter have been born to Jacob by his two wives and two concubines.

And when Rachel, his favourite wife, presents him with a son (Joseph) after years of barrenness, it's time to go home. And so Jacob approaches Laban.

Genesis 30:25b-27 'Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland. Give me my wives and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way. You know how much work I've done for you.'

But **Laban** said to him, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that **the LORD has blessed me** because of you.'

1. The Blessing of Laban

Laban, the pagan, who dabbles in practices (divination) later to be condemned and forbidden for God's people knows he has been blessed by the LORD – 'the LORD has blessed me because of you.'

God's modus operandi is to bless, and he is blessing pagan Laban – because of Jacob. And Jacob agrees. *Genesis 30:29-30* 'You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fared under my care. The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I have been.'

How does that blessing come to Laban? It seems to be a combination of God's supernatural intervention and Jacob's diligence in his work.

In next week's reading, Jacob says, *Genesis 31:38* 'I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried.' I think we see God's hand there. And Jacob goes on to say that he has not taken advantage of his position and he has worked hard and long. *Genesis 31:40* 'The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes.'

That's why Jacob can say in the opening of our reading today, *Genesis 30:29-30* 'You know how I have worked for you ... and the LORD has blessed you wherever I have been.'

A similar thing will happen with Jacob's son, Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt, when, *Genesis 39:3-5* 'the Lord blessed the household of Potiphar because of Joseph.'

Or again, *Daniel 1:19*, when 'Nebuchadnezzar [king of Babylon] found none equal to Daniel [and his friends]; so they entered the king's service.'

God blessing those who don't acknowledge Him, through his people.

And did not Jesus say, *Luke 6:27, 28, 35, 36* 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. ... Love your enemies, do good

to them, ... and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.'

God wants his people to be a blessing to others, even those who don't deserve it, because He is abounding in love and rich in mercy and it's His Modus Operandi to bless.

That's why Paul says, *Romans 12:14, 17, 20*, 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.' Or again, *Ephesians 6:5-9*, 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ... Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, and masters, treat your slaves in the same way.'

In the days of the old Soviet Union the government was not always as unhappy as you may have expected when someone became a Christian. Although they were anti-Christian they recognised one thing about Christians – that they made good workers; they were honest, didn't steal, worked hard. They weren't so bad to have around.

Is that how people feel about us? Are we agents of blessing through our diligent work for an employer, or our voluntary work for a local organisation? Do we bless those we rub shoulders within our sporting or social group? Do we bless our teachers at school or lecturers at uni? Do we undertake our studies in a way that blesses our fellow students? And do we pray for God's supernatural intervention, his blessing of the business we work for and the social group we are a part of?

Non-Christians should want to employ Christians, teach Christians, be in same service group as us, because we are good workers and conduits of God's blessing through our efforts, and our prayers.

Even when there are people like Laban, who sense the blessing but don't want anything to do with God, we are still to be agents of blessing to serve others – not just inside, but beyond the church. We have a God-given duty to bring the indiscriminate love of God the Father to those around us, no strings attached.

That's the purpose of the brekkie club at the high school and the Shine & Strength programs: to serve the school, to do something for the students, even when we are not preaching the gospel; to serve the community in practical helping ways. Same goes for Shine Women, and that's why we allow Christ Church to be used for classical concerts.

Of course, we want to see connections made and some join us, and become Christians, but if we have a narrow result driven motivation we will stop if it doesn't generate numbers. There's always a balance of how to best use our resources for the kingdom of God, but these things are successful if we have blessed others – schools, the community, employers - through serving.

Laban knows that his flocks have done very well while Jacob has been their shepherd, that the LORD has blessed him through Jacob. He's onto a good thing and he is not about to make it easy for this source of blessing to leave. *Genesis 30:27-28* 'If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. ... Name your wages, and I will pay them.'

That's best understood in the sense of, 'Tell me what I owe you - and I will pay.' He legally, of course, owes Jacob nothing. The deal was seven years for Rachel, Oops – Leah. And then seven years really for Rachel. Laban has no intention of sending Jacob on his way with a golden handshake.

Realising that the logistics of him returning to his homeland are a little more complex than when he left his homeland - he now has wives, concubines and children to consider - and since Laban will be no help at all, Jacob agrees to stay on as shepherd for the modest payment of all the abnormally coloured sheep and goats in the flocks and any subsequently born into the flock.

It's a good deal for Laban. Shepherds usually got 20% of the newborns as payment. Speckled, spotted striped animals made up a smaller percentage of the flock than that. And there can be no dispute, it's easy to tell which animals belong to whom.

Although Laban agrees to this proposed arrangement, but, *Genesis 30:35-36*, 'That same day he removed all the unusually coloured sheep and goats, and he placed them in the care of his sons. Then he put a three-day journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob continued to tend the rest of Laban's flocks.' That is - all the usual coloured animals. So Laban thinks Jacob is going to end up with even less sheep & goats to call his own than he might have expected.

2. **The Blessing of Jacob**

Short-changed by Laban, but now with Laban out of the way, Jacob embarks on a bit of unapproved genetic engineering; he is working on some GMOs.

The anti GMO-ers would be beside themselves. But Jacob understands the well-known 'scientific principle' that the colour of kids and lambs is determined by what their parents see when they are mating. And so he makes sure they see something that will make them striped or spotted - branches that have been peeled, or even just facing the direction where Laban has taken the spotty, stripy animals.

OK, so we modern scientific type people know that what animals look at when they are mating hasn't got anything to do with it, but as far as Jacob was concerned it did and so he gets on with the job, trusting that it will produce the desired result.

And even if that technique seems a little strange to us the other thing he did was quite sensible by our understanding. It was only the stronger animals that he let see the stripy bark. And so not only did he build up the numbers of unusually coloured stock, he ensured that they were the best stock.

Well this goes on for a number of years and Laban is a bit peeved about what is going on. We see that in *Genesis 31:5-9*. Laban keeps altering the agreement. 'You are doing well - let's make it just the striped ones.' And what happens - lots and lots of stripy babies. 'No, no - let's make it the spotted ones.' And what happens - lots and lots of spotty babies. **God is blessing Jacob** because His Modus Operandi is to bless. And so, *Genesis 30:43* 'In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and camels and donkeys.'

Now we tend to get hung up on the science of all this and worry about the peeling of strips of bark from branches. It all seems a bit strange to us, but Jacob, who is going about business the best way he knows, is quite clear on what is happening. Did you hear it in what Jacob tells Rachel and Leah? That despite their father doing the dirty on him, *Genesis 31:5d* 'The God of my father has been with me.' *Genesis 31:7d* 'God has not allowed [Laban] to harm me.'

And then tells them about a dream he had in which God appears to him. As far as Jacob is concerned the success of his selective breeding program is down to God. Jacob's doing his bit, but he knows that it is only because of God that it is working so well. And God intervenes because, as we heard, *Genesis 31:12d*, 'I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you.'

Laban is being unfair, and unreasonable. He is being selfish with blessing he has received, and the blessing is removed and given to Jacob.

Maybe it's a bit of superstition, mixed with some common sense, maybe even mixed with a bit of, 'I'll show Laban that deceiving so and so!' Maybe Jacob's motives are not 100% pure but he, like Laban earlier, can recognise the LORD's blessing particularly because of this dream where God goes on to say to him, *Genesis 31:13* 'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.'

Why 'God of Bethel' rather than 'God of Abraham and Issac'? At this difficult time, at this turning point in his life, God reminds Jacob of his encounter with him at Bethel, at least 14 years earlier – up to 20 years earlier. God reminds him of that other dream years before, that dream of the stairway to heaven and of the promises he made then. *Genesis 28:13-15* 'I am the LORD, the God of your fathers Abraham and Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, ... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.'

God has been with him, he has seen what Laban is doing, he has been with Jacob, blessing him to fulfil his promises, and now it's time for Jacob to go back to the promised land.

Although Jacob's motives may have been mixed, God sees that he is getting a raw deal and so blesses him and increases his flocks so that Jacob is in a position to return to the land he had been promised. God is working out his purposes and he is in control.

In Jacob's time in Haran, the promises begin to be fulfilled. Pretty good inroads have been made into the promise of many descendants. People, like Laban, are already being blessed through him, and God is indeed with Jacob, watching over him, increasing his flocks in unusual ways. And now it is time to return to the land of promise he left some 20 years ago. And so we read, *Genesis 31:17-18*, 'Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Aram to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.' He returns so that the process may continue, that the promises may reach their fulfilment that **all peoples on earth will be blessed** through Jacob and his offspring.

3. **The Blessing of All Peoples**

The whole speckled, spotty sheep thing seems strange, but as they say, 'God works in mysterious ways.' Sometimes we don't like the mysterious ways that God works; we get hung up on how it fits with our scientific world view; how it fits with our society and culture; or how it fits with our theological world view; but God does work in mysterious ways - beyond what we would like him to sometimes, and we worship a God whose foolishness is wiser than our wisdom, and whose weakness is stronger than our strength. *1 Corinthians 1:25*.

And perhaps the most mysterious way of all, the most foolish way of all is, *1 Corinthians 1:18*, the message of the cross which is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Because that is the way God fulfils his promise to bring blessing to all people. Jacob's offspring, Jacob's descendant, through whom the blessing comes, is Jesus. And the blessing is the salvation we are offered through his death in our place.

Our New Testament reading put it this way: *Ephesians 1:3, 7-8*, 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us.'

Or again', as Paul writes: Galatians 3:14, 'He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.'

Every spiritual blessing – righteousness declared, relationship restored, holiness imputed, the empowering personal presence of the Holy Spirit now, and the sure and certain hope of eternal life. God's Modus Operandi is to bless.

The fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to bless all people are ours as we trust in Jesus, as we rely on him and his death for us. We are already blessed in the heavenlies, and we look forward to the consummation of that when Christ returns.

And we have those promises, those blessings. Even if we don't have large flocks of spotty sheep or other material blessing, we have all those spiritual blessings. In the Old Testament the blessings are more physical and tied to the land. In the New Testament, following the death/resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the blessings focus is more spiritual and tied to heaven.

We mustn't go down the so-called 'prosperity gospel' track and overemphasise material blessing in this age. Whether we are in a time of material blessing or not, we can be like Paul, confident that God will meet our needs and be content in any and every circumstance knowing the blessing we have in Christ, knowing his presence with us, and knowing and the sure and certain hope of future glory.

We might not have a flock of funny looking sheep, but we do have a Lamb - Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. *John 1:29*.

Please join me in prayer.

Prayer

Thank you heavenly Father that with faith in Jesus we can know every spiritual blessing. Help us to be a blessing to others, to reflect your love, showing the redemptive love of Jesus by action and by word.

Strengthen us by your Holy Spirit to bless others - physically and spiritually - because your Modus Operandi to bless you call us to join you and so show ourselves to be your children.

And help us share Christ, help us point people to Jesus so they have the opportunity to respond and share in the full blessing of life with you now and forever.

Amen.