

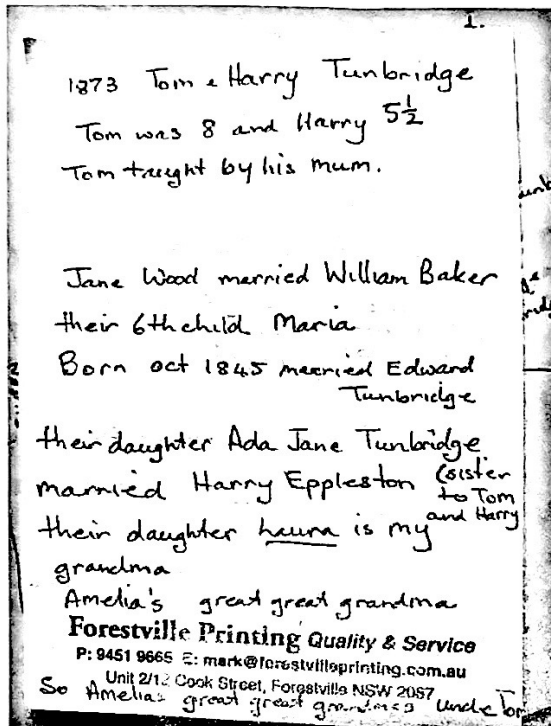
Isaac – Genesis 26:1-5, 12-33, Ephesians 2:14-22

Intro

Started this series on genealogy at CBC – which I've always thought was something that Christians who aren't my sort of Christian get into – but I must confess that I have found it quite fascinating.

Genealogies seem boring/irrelevant to us, but for many cultures – for Jesus' culture – they are very important.

Interesting to think about why western modern societies are not interested in genealogy... (French historian Pierre Nora puts it, we have "*severed the living connections we had to the past.*") Is the church somewhere where this is



reversed – where we seek to maintain our living connections to the past?

Asking the congregation who knew any of their great great grandparents' names. Why? Interesting stories. (Living connections to the past.)

(My story – telling congregation my grandma was born a Leal, her mother an Epplestone, her mother a Tunbridge, her mother a Baker and her mother was Jane Wood a convict. Then another church member saying these were her great great grandparents - discovering that my great great great grandparents Edward Tunbridge and Maria Baker were Julie-ann's great great grandparents – that we are third cousins once removed!)

Isaac

But one of the highlights of this series so far for me has been to really focus on the character of Isaac.

We know a lot about other people in relation to Isaac; the joy and laughter surrounding his birth (which gives him his name 'he laughs'), the strange command to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, the finding of a wife for him, Rebekah, by Abraham's servant, and the trick Rebekah plays on him in his old age so Jacob, her favourite, receive the first born's blessing.

In all these stories Isaac seems to sit quietly in the background.

Except in our reading today where he is the main actor, settling in Gerar, in Genesis 26:1, alongside the Philistines and their king, Abimelech, and prospering in Gerar to the point where the Philistines get jealous (verse 14) and tell him to leave. And what does Isaac do? He leaves.

And then, in the verses we read, we hear the story of Isaac's alternative response to conflict. How, faced by the malice of the Philistines who had filled in the wells dug in the days of his father Abraham, Isaac re-digs the wells.

Then when the herders from Gerar quarrel with his herders, again, he does not fight them but moves on - naming the wells *Esek* (Contention) and *Sitnah* (Enmity). He continues to dig wells and names the third well *Rehoboth* (Broad places or Room), saying, *"Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land."*

What is the significance of wells in the ancient world? They represent, in real terms life, life and health, and social connection. It is no coincidence that three Old Testament patriarchs meet their future wives (or their father's servant meets in Isaac's case) beside wells...and wells can also – as in our story today – be the setting for conflict - *or for the possibility of a different way of responding to conflict.*

And it is at this point that God appears again to Isaac (**just a coincidence or a teaching point?**) renewing the covenant with him... And as if to commemorate this moment – God's promise of life and ongoing social connection – again we are told Isaac's servants dig a well.

Then there's this amazing reconciliation. Abimelech comes to Isaac, with his advisor Ahuzzath and his army commander Phicol - a kind of interagency delegation. *"Why have you come to me seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?"* asks Isaac, calling a spade a spade (all that wells digging!)

They say they have seen that God is with him and want to make a covenant with him. Isaac throws them a feast, and they eat and drink together, and in the morning they exchange oaths and depart in peace. And – at this moment – Isaac's servants burst in and announce, *"We have found water!"* Dramatic and symbolic moment.

So again the well commemorates the moment and its promise. And he calls it this well *Shibah* (well of the oath/covenant.)

Thinking about healthy conflict resolution... what strategies does Isaac, the well-digger, embody?

- *he is prepared to acknowledge that conflict is occurring - to literally name the conflict.*
- *he demonstrates calm, non-defensive and respectful reactions in response to aggression.*
- *he is prepared to listen, to work out a reconciliation.*
- *he shows a willingness to forgive and move on without holding onto resentment and anger.*

There are alternatives, unfortunately, to being people of peace, and I also came across this guide – a tongue in cheek guide - from Mennonite conflict resolution facilitator and trainer, Ron Kraybill for 'how to turn a disagreement into a feud'.

1. Be sure to develop and maintain a healthy fear of conflict, letting your own feelings build up so you are in an explosive frame of mind.
2. If you must state your concerns, be as vague and general as possible. Then the other person cannot do anything practical to change the situation.
3. Assume you know all the facts and you are totally right. The use of a clinching Bible verse is helpful. Speak prophetically for truth and justice; do most of the talking.
4. With a touch of defiance, announce your willingness to talk with anyone who wishes to discuss the problem with you. But do not take steps to initiate such conversation.
5. Latch tenaciously onto whatever evidence you can find that shows the other person is merely jealous of you.
6. Judge the motivation of the other party on any previous experience that showed failure or unkindness. Keep track of any angry words.
7. If the discussion should, alas, become serious, view the issue as a win/lose struggle. Avoid possible solutions and go for total victory and unconditional surrender. Don't get too many options on the table.
8. Pass the buck! If you are about to get cornered into a solution, indicate you are without power to settle; you need your partner, spouse, bank, whatever.

Ron Kraybill, Tell it to the Church, Lynn Buzzard, David C. Cook, 1982, p. 23.

We do have options according to this story about Isaac. We have options to be well-diggers, people who despite opposition, despite discouragement, can face and name conflict, who patiently persist in doing good, who are not aggressive, who are prepared to listen and to work out solutions...

We have these options because – if we take this genealogy seriously - well-digging is part of our DNA. We are children of Abraham and children of Isaac, members of the household of God through the work of the great well-digger, Jesus. The one who, Ephesians 2:14, put all the options on the table, who gave his life to be "*our peace....[to break] down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us....*" who has reconciled us to God through his own life and example.

I have been thinking about well-diggers – I preached this the week my beautiful friend Simon Carey Holt died very suddenly. I don't think I have met anyone who could listen as well and as deeply as Simon, who persevered despite discouragement in quietly doing good, who was not afraid to speak truth, to stand up for compassion, but did it so gently, and who worked to bring people together – and then cooked and served the most magnificent feast!

Who is an example for you of well digging?

In what ways have we – as Open Baptists – dug wells? Successfully?

In what ways is Avalon Peace Baptist Church digging wells?