**Service 2 based on the story of Rebekah and Isaac by Margaret Roe**

**Welcome**

**Call to Worship**

Let us be still and recognise God’s presence with us as we come to worship him and listen to his word.

**A gathering hymn or hymn of praise such as**

**StF 25 God is here as we his people or StF 54 I will worship**

**Opening Prayer (**PRAYERS FOR ALL SEASONS 1 232)

Loving God,

we thank you

that in all the changing circumstances of our lives

you are a God we can depend on­

always faithful,

always true,

always loving,

always merciful.

We thank you that you are a God who is constantly at work ­

in our day-to-day lives,

in our fellowship,

in the Church,

in the world.

Day by day,

week by week,

year by year,

you are working out your purposes.

Seen or unseen,

recognised or unrecognised,

appreciated or taken for granted,

you are moving through your Spirit,

striving to build your kingdom and fulfil your will.

Loving God,

 you do not work alone,

 but have invited us to play a part in your purpose.

Help us to keep our side of the bargain ­

to do our bit as you do yours,

to be a people whose lives clearly witness to your love,

to live in a way that is consistent with what we believe and honouring to you.

Help us to make the most of everything you have given us,

to use our gifts,

to grasp our opportunities,

and to offer our time, our money and our talents

freely in your service.

And help us finally,

having played our part,

to leave all things in your hands,

knowing that, though all else may fail,

your love never will.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Introduction**

This service is about the second generation of the Patriarchs. Sarah and Abraham had a son Isaac, the one through whom the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky would be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah had moved from their homeland and settled in Canaan and had become very prosperous. But Abraham was anxious for his son to marry into his tribe and not one of the Canaanite women. And so he sends his chief servant back to his homeland to find a wife for Isaac. We are going to hear about the success of that journey from his future wife, Rebekah, and also from her nurse, Deborah. Later we move to the end of Isaac’s story and into the next generation.

**Hymn StF 628 Faithful one, so unchanging**

We pick up the story of the servant’s journey to find a wife for Isaac after he has met Rebekah at the well and been offered hospitality. At the house he tells her father Bethuel, her mother and brother Laban the story of his journey so far.

**Bible Reading** **Genesis 24:34-61**

**Comment**

There is the sense in the servant’s account that God had planned everything and his prayer that he would be led to find the right person as a wife for Isaac had been answered. I wonder if we have that same trust in God when we are uncertain of the outcome of something we are doing. Do we pray? Do we expect an answer?

Rebekah reflects on what has happened.

**The Arranged Marriage – Rebekah**

“Would I go with him?” I was asked.

I was surprised to hear myself say yes so readily.

I was also surprised that I had been consulted.

Women did not usually get any say in who they married.

And I did not even know the man that I was to marry.

The “him” in the question had been merely a servant.

But a wealthy servant – he had not travelled alone and had brought camels and gifts to give my family.

He was looking for a bride for the son of his master.

And apparently I fitted the criteria.

I was a member of the family that his master Abraham had left many years earlier.

He had prayed to his God by the well to make his journey successful, and the things I had said and done were exactly the signs he had asked God for.

But to leave my home and family and travel to a strange land to marry someone I had never met?

I was surprised my family were prepared to let me go.

The man was impatient to return.

He wanted to start back the next day.

I had no time to think about it.

No time to prepare myself for a wedding.

But no doubt my future husband’s family would make all the preparations.

And at least my old nurse Deborah would travel with me.

She would calm my fears on the journey, as she had calmed my fears when I was a young child.

She would tell me all I needed to know about what was expected of me as a wife.

And so we journey towards this land.

I am anxious, but excited by the prospect of a new life ahead of me.

What can I expect?

A rich family certainly.

But will I be welcome?

Will Isaac love me?

Will I love him?

What sort of marriage will we have?

What will the future hold for our children?

And yet if this servant is right and he is convinced that I am the right person, that God has led him to me, then I have nothing to fear.

He has a purpose for his marriage.

It seems so important that this Isaac whom I am to marry continues the family line.

His father was promised that he would be the father of a great nation.

And I am to have a part in that.

And that must mean that I will bear Isaac sons.

I just hope he will love me as well.

**Comment**

As the script suggests, this was an arranged marriage, although Rebekah was asked if she was prepared to go. There is some controversy today over cultures where marriages are still arranged and the autonomy of women in those societies. I think Rebekah must have been very brave to leave the family where she had grown up and travel to a new land with a complete stranger to marry a man she had never met. But there are two redeeming features in the story. She was going to marry a distant relative so hopefully there would be some connection between them, and the nurse she had known from childhood would be going with her. We hear the nurse’s take on the story.

**The Nurse’s Story - Deborah**

I worked for a wealthy household.

I was employed as a nurse for their daughter Rebekah and stayed with them all the time she was growing up.

I developed a very close relationship with Rebekah.

We were like mother and daughter.

She had always sought my advice rather than her mother’s.

And her father Bethuel and brother Laban were far too busy looking after their large herds and flocks to be bothered with a girl.

All a girl was useful for was cooking for the men and fetching water from the well.

She had grown up into a beautiful young woman and was now of a marriageable age.

What Bethuel and Laban were interested in now was to find a good husband for her.

One who would pay a good bride price.

Everyone was excited when visitors came from a far off land.

The man had met Rebekah by the well and being the kind girl that she was, she had drawn water for him and his camels.

He had showered her with gifts, bracelets and a nose ring.

That was most unusual unless marriage was intended.

Laban was certainly impressed by the display of wealth.

But that didn’t surprise me.

He was always on the look-out to get a good deal.

Anyway, he made the man and the other servants welcome.

The tale he told was so curious.

His master, Abraham, was Bethuel’s uncle.

We knew the story of Abraham.

He and his wife Sarah had left their family home to move to a new land which he said had been promised to him by God. We heard news of them from passing travellers from time to time. They had thought that Sarah was barren but in her old age she had given birth to a son Isaac.

And now that Isaac was ready for marriage, the servant had been sent to find a wife for Isaac amongst their extended family. Rebekah was an obvious choice although the servant did not know it at the time.

However, his prayer to his God had been answered and Rebekah in drawing water for him and his camels had answered his prayer.

It seemed just right and Bethuel and Laban were very keen to do the deal, particularly when the man brought out more gifts of clothing and jewellery for Rebekah and for the family. Abraham was clearly a rich man who could afford a good bride price.

The man wanted to start his journey home the next day. Rebekah’s mother wanted her and the men to stay for ten days.

It would have been such a shock to lose her so quickly.

No time to prepare her wedding garments or to teach her what was expected of her as a wife.

Surprisingly Rebekah was called and asked if she was willing to go.

She was a wilful girl and I can imagine the arguments if she had said no.

But surprisingly she said yes.

Perhaps she was keen for an adventure, to get away from her domineering brother.

It was agreed that I would go with her.

I could give her all the advice and support she needed.

And now we have arrived at our new home.

I am so pleased that Isaac and Rebekah love each other.

So often these arranged marriages are just a matter of duty.

All she needs now is to produce a family.

But I’m sure that this God of Abraham will have that under control, as he had everything else.

**Comment**

We know very little about Deborah, other than that she was Rebekah’s nurse. I’m sure she played a significant role in Rebekah’s life, not just caring for her as a child but more as encourager and advisor. The same was true in the British royal household – royal children were more often with their nannies then their parents and turned to them for support.

It is so easy to forget those quiet people in the background who offer care, encouragement and support to others. Perhaps we need to think about and acknowledge such people in our families and churches.

**Hymn StF 611 Brother, sister, let me serve you**

**Comment**

Our story now moves on a number of years. After years of being barren, Rebekah gave birth to twins, Jacob and Esau. We always think of them in that order but in fact Esau was the elder. She struggled in her pregnancy and was told that there were twins in her womb and that the older would serve the younger. Jacob came out of the womb grasping his brother’s heel. We hear a short story about their relationship.

**Bible Reading - Genesis 25:27-34**

**Comment**

So what was the future for those two sons? If Esau had effectively sold his birthright to Jacob, who was to receive his father’s inheritance, Jacob or Esau? The tradition was for the eldest son to inherit the majority of the faither’s estate, with very little left for younger sons.

Isaac was old and frail and called Esau to him, asking him to prepare a meal for him of wild game, so that they could share a fellowship meal and he could give Esau his final blessing. But Rebekah, who favoured Jacob, had other ideas. She could make a much quicker meal using goats from their flock and send Jacob in with it to obtain the blessing. But Jacob has doubts.

**Bible reading - Genesis 27:11-40**

You can imagine how Esau felt after that. He was ready to kill Jacob. Here is Rebekah’s account of what she did and the consequences.

**The Deceitful Wife - Rebekah**

I feel ashamed.

I deceived my husband.

And he was blind and frail.

I loved him dearly.

But I also loved my son, Jacob.

I only wanted the best for him.

It seemed so unfair that as the younger son, he would only inherit a very small share in the land and animals we owned.

From his birth, when he emerged from the womb grasping his brother’s heel, I felt God had plans for him.

Even before that, as the twins were kicking in my womb, God had told me that the elder would serve the younger.

I don’t know why I loved him so much.

Although he loved the home life and was a bit of a mother’s boy, he could also be very selfish and deceitful.

As a teenager he had persuaded his brother to sell his birthright for a bowl of the stew he was preparing.

Was the oath Esau made then binding?

If so, I was only finishing the task by making sure that Jacob had his dying father’s blessing.

But there was more than the usual inheritance at stake here.

There was the promise to Isaac’s father, Abraham.

I had visions of Jacob’s family spreading out over the whole of this region.

That was what I wanted for my younger son.

And so I tricked Isaac.

I prepared a meal and dressed Jacob in Esau’s clothes and goatskins and sent Jacob in to give his father the meal which would precede his dying blessing.

And it worked.

But deceit has its consequences.

Esau was angry enough to kill his brother, although he would probably wait until Isaac was dead.

Isaac was too frail to worry about what had happened.

But there was a way out.

Perhaps Jacob could find a wife from among our own people.

I was sure my brother Laban would help.

I’d heard that he had two fine daughters.

And Laban might help Jacob to grow out of his deceitful tendencies.

I think he must have inherited that from our side of the family.

Laban could be just as determined to get his own way.

They would make a good match for each other.

But who am I to talk after what I have just done?

I had no problem persuading Isaac.

And so Jacob went on his way.

I shall miss his company, particularly since his father has not long to live.

I don’t think I will ever see my son again.

But even though I feel so guilty about my deceit, it seems right.

I am sure God has his plans for Jacob.

Was I just helping God to bring about his plans?

Does that justify my deceit?

I’m sure God can achieve his purposes without such deceit.

But I’m equally sure that God will forgive me.

**Comment**

Sibling rivalry is nothing new. Nor is the way in some families where some children are favoured over others. Going back to the royal family again we have seen the grudge that Prince Harry seems to have against his family for the way he perceives he has been treated. But in God’s sight and it should be in ours, all people have equal value and should be treated fairly.

There are also issues in this story about deceit. I’m sure most of us have been brought up not to be deceitful. Might there be occasions when the ends justify the means?

And so Jacob has gone to his uncle, Laban. It will be twenty years, two wives and twelve children later before he returns to his home. But that story is for another service.

**STF 519 Father I place into your hands or 471 Lord, I come to you**

**Prayer of confession**

Lord, we think of times when we have favoured some members of our family over others, or members of our church family or looked down on people because their life-style or values are different from ours.

Forgive us and help us to remember that everyone is made in God’s image and is of equal value.

Lord, we think of times when we have been jealous of others because they seem to have been favoured or given preferential treatment or promotion over us.

Forgive us and help us to look not only to our own interests but to the interests of others.

Lord, we think of times when we have been deceitful in order to get our own way.

Forgive us and help us not to do anything out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

Give us the same humility that we find in the example of Jesus. Amen.

**Prayers of intercession Prayers for All Seasons 2 260**

Almighty God,

we thank you for your great and never-ending love

which never stops seeking us out,

never fades,

and never lets us go.

We thank you for your care that we experience

every moment of every day,

for everything you have done for us and all the world in Christ,

and we pray now for those who feel lonely,

unloved,

unwanted.

Lord, in your mercy,

 **reach out in love.**

We pray for those whose relationships have been broken,

whether through separation, divorce or bereavement;

and we pray for those who have never enjoyed

the relationships they might have had ­-

children unwanted by their parents,

parents alienated from children,

family members estranged from one another.

Lord, in your mercy,

 **reach out in love.**

We pray for individuals who feel rejected by society –

­those who have no confidence in their abilities,

no place where they feel accepted,

no sense of their own worth.

Lord, in your mercy,

 **reach out in love.**

We pray for communities divided by prejudice, race or religion,

for churches where there is disagreement,

tension and disharmony,

and for nations broken by war and violence.

Lord, in your mercy,

 **reach out in love.**

Almighty God,

bring friendship to the lonely,

reconciliation to the estranged,

harmony to the divided,

and comfort to the bereaved.

Inour homes and our families,

our schools and our places of work,

our country and our world,

may your love be shared among us,

bringing hope and healing.

Lord in your mercy,

 **reach out in love.**

Inthe name of Christ we ask it. **Amen.**

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Offertory**

**Hymn StF 563 O Jesus, I have promised**

**Blessing** – The blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

**or say the grace together – The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**