**Service 3 based on the story of Rachel and Leah by Margaret Roe**

**Call to worship**

We come into God’s presence. Be still and know that He is here with us.

**Hymn StF 102 For the beauty of the earth or StF 51 Great is thy faithfulness or some other hymn of praise**

**Opening Prayer of praise and confession**

**Prayers for all Seasons 1 191**

Living and loving God,

once more we bring you our praise and worship.

We acknowledge you as our God.

We recognise your greatness and power.

We marvel at your love and compassion.

We come before you with awe and wonder.

You are Lord of heaven and earth,

of space and time,

of this world and all of the universe,

of life and death.

Living and loving God,

draw near to us

and help us to draw near to you.

Come to us through your Holy Spirit

and help us to open our hearts to the risen Christ.

Speak to us through the worship we offer this day,

and through it all deepen our faith.

Living God,

we praise you that there is so much

that speaks to us of your love and purpose -

so much in our lives,

in our daily experience,

in the world around us,

in the vastness of the universe,

in the fellowship we share with one another,

and in the relationship we enjoy with you,

through which you teach and guide and challenge us.

Forgive us that we do not sometimes hear your voice,

that often we do not want to hear.

Forgive us that sometimes we refuse to listen,

that often we are closed to anything

but our own words.

Open our hearts

to all the ways you are at work.

Open our eyes

so that we may glimpse your purpose more fully.

Open our ears

Help us to see everything that points to your activity

in our lives,

in our fellowship,

in your Church,

and in the world.

And speak through us as we work and witness for you,

that others may come to know you for themselves.

Amen.

**Introduction**

This service looks at the third generation of the matriarchs in Genesis. The first generation gave us Abraham’s wives Sarah and Hagar, then we had Isaac and Rebekah and we now move on to Jacob and his wives. Jacob has run away from Canaan because he has stolen his brother Esau’s birthright and he fears that Esau will kill him. His parents advise him to go to Rebekah’s brother Laban, hoping that he will find a wife from his family.

After our next hymn we hear what happens.

**Hymn StF 556** **Just as I am, without one plea or StF 156 From the breaking of the dawn**

**Genesis 29:1-30**

**The Jilted Bride - Rachel**

How could he be so cruel!

We had waited seven years for that day.

Jacob loved me as much I loved him, ever since we first met by the well.

He wanted to impress me, rolling the stone away without the help of other men so that my animals could drink.

He had been happy to work for my father for seven years in order to marry me.

It seemed so right, we were made for each other.

And I was sure that it was part of God’s purpose.

But when the day came, my father gave my sister Leah to him as his bride.

Just imagine how I felt.

I wept with disappointment.

I raged at my father.

I feared for the future.

Could I ever look Jacob in the face again?

But then questions came into my mind.

How did Jacob feel?

When did he realise he had been deceived?

Would he be happy to have Leah as his wife?

I couldn’t imagine that he would but the doubts were there.

Perhaps Jacob would come to love Leah as much as I thought he loved me.

Would he still love me?

I feared for the future again.

Would I be expected to marry someone else?

And if so could I love him as much as I had loved Jacob?

Was there a way out of this?

Apparently there was.

My father had given Jacob the chance to marry me as well.

Provided that he worked for him for another seven years.

Seven years?

Would Jacob think me worth it?

Fortunately he did.

And we only had to wait until the seven days of feasting for Leah’s wedding were over.

Those seven days seemed to last as long as the seven years I had waited.

I am so happy now.

I am with the man I love.

All I want to complete my happiness is a son.

**The Surprise Bride - Leah**

Let’s face it. I was jealous of my younger sister.

She seemed to have everything going for her.

She was more attractive than I was, more popular,

and in love with this young man Jacob.

I fancied him, too, but he only had eyes for Rachel.

And now they were to marry.

Admittedly they had had to wait for seven years, our father determined to get his money’s worth out of Jacob’s labour.

But as the day for the wedding approached I was getting more and more depressed.

What would become of me?

I should have been married by now.

As the eldest I should have been married first

Why couldn’t our father have found a husband for me?

It was a disgrace for a woman not to be married.

I began to feel ashamed of myself.

Did my father think I was not fit to be married?

Had he got something against me?

And so the wedding day came.

Everyone except me was so happy.

I sat in the corner, hoping no-one would notice me.

Towards the end of the day my father approached me.

I thought he was going to tell me off for not joining in the celebrations.

But he had a surprise for me.

I was so astounded I could hardly believe it.

He told me to go to the bridal tent so that the women could prepare me to meet my husband.

Me? What was my father playing at?

This was Rachel’s big day. Not mine.

But no, this was what my father intended.

I was favoured after all.

My father did think I was marriageable.

But then all those doubts crept in.

What would Rachel think?

More to the point, what would Jacob think when he realised it was me, not his beloved Rachel?

As father led me over to the bridal tent, I caught a glimpse of Rachel.

Her face betrayed her feelings.

Disappointment, anger and hatred all rolled into one.

How could I face her the next day?

As Jacob came into the tent that night, I felt part of a huge deception.

But I was not going to reveal myself to Jacob before I had to.

I was going to enjoy one night with a man I loved and who thought he loved me.

I felt so guilty when he kept calling me Rachel and saying how much he had longed for that night.

And he was so angry the next morning when he realised he had been tricked.

But it worked out in the end.

My father allowed Jacob to marry Rachel as well.

He always loved Rachel more than me.

But I am content with my lot.

Jacob is a good man and shares his nights between the two of us.

**Comment**

It’s difficult for us to imagine the situation all those years ago, of Jacob working seven years for his bride and then being given her sister. But the feelings evoked in this story are not uncommon in our experience. The feeling of being let down after a long period of waiting, of being deceived, of disappointment suddenly being turned into completely the opposite, of rivalry and jealousy.

How do we cope with those emotions? Do we place things into God’s hands? Do we trust in his goodness and grace? Do we believe that things will turn out will in the end?

**Hymn StF 104 God moves in a mysterious way or StF 519 Father, I place into your hands**

**Introduction**

So, both Leah and Rachel are married to Jacob. The rivalry between the sisters continues, however, as Jacob’s family increases. We hear now about the children they bear.

**Genesis 29:31-35, 30:1-24**

**The Family - Leah**

It was not long before I fell pregnant.

I was delighted that I had conceived before Rachel.

She still hadn’t forgiven me for that wedding night even though it was as much a shock to me as it was to her.

But she knew that Jacob loved her more than me and had gloated over that.

Now I had something to gloat over.

I saw it as compensation.

Perhaps God was being kind to me.

I was glad to have a child to love and who would love me.

And so my first son was born.

I named him Reuben – “See, a son”, because the Lord had seen my misery.

Three more sons followed in quick succession.

I also named them according to how I felt.

Simeon – “God has heard”.

Levi – which means “joined”, my husband will now be joined to me.

Judah – “Praise God”.

At last I was happy.

I had something to praise God for.

By this time Rachel was getting jealous, she still had no children of her own.

And to my shame, I taunted her.

In the end she gave Jacob her maid Bilhah who bore him two sons for her.

And since I had not conceived for a while I did the same and my maid Zilpah had two sons.

One day Rachel and I had a stupid argument over some mandrakes which Reuben had found. They are regarded as an aphrodisiac and Rachel wanted them.

I refused, saying she had already taken my husband why should she have them as well?

It was silly, I know, but Rachel said I could sleep with Jacob that night if I gave them to her.

It was as though I had hired Jacob that night with those mandrakes.

If it was supposed to be aphrodisiac for Rachel it didn’t work.

It was me who became pregnant, another son, Issachar, which means “hired”.

Another son soon followed, Zebulun, which means “honour”.

I was sure my husband would honour me now that I had six fine sons.

There was a daughter, too, called Dinah, but her story is a sad one which I will not relate here.

My family was complete.

And I was happy.

**Comment**

Leah names her children according to how she was feeling at the time. Often today children in Africa are given names like precious, grace, glory, blessing. Of course, many of our Christian names have meaning and sometimes we feel that the name suits us well and that it says something about us. It’s worth finding out what your name means if you do not know.

**The Longed for Child - Rachel**

I had to wait so long for the child I had longed and hoped for.

Leah seemed to have no problem in conceiving.

Like clockwork she produced four fine sons in the first four years of marriage.

I remained barren.

She gloated over me.

It was some compensation for her for she knew Jacob loved me rather than her.

We had never been close but we drifted further apart.

“Give him your maid” she had taunted.

“That’s the only way you’ll bear him sons.”

Perhaps she was right, but was this what God intended after our love for each other?

And so I reluctantly gave Jacob my maid Bilhah.

The thought of Jacob with her was even worse than with Leah.

She bore him two sons for me.

But they never felt as though they were mine.

I wanted a child of my own.

After a while Leah gave Jacob her maid Zilpah, who bore him sons.

It did not seem so bad then, if she couldn’t bear children either.

But then she began to conceive again – two more sons and a daughter.

All my fears started again.

Would Jacob still continue to love me?

Would there come a time when he would stop summoning me to his bed-chamber?

Would I never conceive?

And then it happened.

One day I began to notice the change in my body.

I recognised it easily enough.

I had seen it so often in the three other women.

I was overjoyed.

But also fearful.

Would anything go wrong?

After all I was not the young woman he had married all those years ago.

We had been married for over ten years and had waited seven years before that.

The nine months passed slowly.

But eventually the longed for child arrived, a boy.

We named him Joseph.

He was the apple of his father’s eye.

He could do no wrong in his sight.

I knew Jacob loved me more than the other women.

I was still his favourite wife and so Joseph was his favourite son.

In spite of my fears his love for me had never diminished.

But what was the future for this child, growing up with ten older brothers?

Would they include him in their games or would the fact that he was his father’s favourite make them jealous?

Would they be kind to him?

Only time will tell.

But I fear for him.

And yet I also feel that God has a purpose for him.

The fact that he has been born after so long has made him special.

It seems to be God’s way.

**Comment**

There are a number of examples in the Bible of women conceiving after a long period of waiting. Both Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel’s grandmother and mother were a long time before they conceived. So was Samuel’s mother. And in the New Testament there was Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. It often seems to be God’s way for those for whom he has a special purpose.

Rivalry between siblings is not uncommon. The sibling rivalry seems to pass from one generation to the next – Jacob and Esau, and now Rachel and Leah. It must have been hard for Rachel to watch Leah give birth to healthy sons, wondering where her future lay. Eventually, as we heard, she gave birth to Joseph and I’m sure you know his story. And yes, his brothers were jealous of him because he was the father’s favourite. But because of their plot to get rid of him he ended up in Egypt and was able to provide for the family when there was a famine in Canaan.

Often things seem to work out well in the end. Joseph was convinced that God had a purpose in him going to Egypt.

Perhaps there are times when you have felt that everything was going wrong but have turned out well in the end. Did you feel that God had a hand in it?

**Hymn StF 531 What a friend we have in Jesus**

**Prayers for All Seasons 2 260 (adapted)**

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.

those who have longed to have children but have been unable to conceive

or have gone through IVF treatment or had a child through surrogacy.

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.

for families torn apart by war, violence or disaster.

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.**

We pray for those we know and love, particularly any going through difficult times at the moment who need our prayers today.

Lord in your mercy,

**reach out in love.**

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

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Offertory**

**Hymn StF 476 One more step along the world I go or StF 465 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah**

**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.**