

GOD'S PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE

"It's time to return to good, old-fashioned Biblical family values and why is not the church doing something about it?" say our politicians, generally when Christians are raising awkward issues about Third World Debt or the war in Iraq and they want them to go away.

It cannot be denied though that family life is in a precarious state these days, as roughly half of all marriages break down, parents take new partners, the rate of teenage pregnancies continues to rise, of all which means that an increasing number of children have a somewhat shaky family life. The results of this are not good so yes, maybe the church should be preaching "*good, old-fashioned Biblical family values*" and today is as good a time as any when we are celebrating a baby's baptism and when, in our programme of "The Bible and Me," we have reached that famous four-generation family known as "The Patriarchs:" Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

You find their stories in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Abraham was a well-to-do man, living in Mesopotamia, when God promised him that he would be the founding father of a great and holy nation. Fine, thought Abraham, except for one slight problem: he and his wife Sarah were getting old and they had no children. Great and holy nations do not consist of two people.

As time went by and there was still no sign of a child, Abraham decided to do something about it and fathered a son with a servant girl instead. This was socially acceptable at the time. No sooner had he done so, than his wife became pregnant. Her son was called Isaac, the servant's son was called Ishmael and you could cut the atmosphere in that house with a knife. Finally Ishmael and his mother were sent away. Ishmael became the founding father of the Arabs, Isaac the founding father of the Jews and thousands of years later you can still cut the atmosphere with a knife....

Isaac married Rebekah and had twin sons, Esau and Jacob who were like chalk and cheese. Jacob was bitterly jealous of Esau because Esau was the older and would inherit the property. Rebekah spoiled Jacob to make it up to him and Isaac just seems to have kept out of it altogether. Finally Jacob managed to trick Esau out of his inheritance, Esau went ballistic and Jacob ran away.

He ended up living with his Uncle Laban, who had two daughters, one plain and one pretty. Jacob fell in love with the pretty one and wanted to marry her. Laban said that Jacob would have to work for seven years first. After the seven years Jacob had a wedding but the bride never lifted her veil until after the ceremony, and his uncle had married him to the plain daughter. Jacob would have to work another seven years for the pretty one. He did so (men were allowed more than one wife in those days) and finally got the woman he loved. Wife number one produced a family of fine sons while wife number two for a long time could not have children. More trouble on the home front. When the pretty wife finally gave birth to the son named Joseph, he was the pampered darling of the household and all his brothers hated him.

Jacob meanwhile had got his own back on his uncle by cheating him out of a lot of sheep and decided it was time for another speedy exit. He patched up the quarrel with Esau but his own family life continued to go from bad to worse as Joseph exploited his position as the favourite son and his brothers, quite simply, wanted him dead. They made a profit instead by selling him as a slave into Egypt and told their father that a wild beast had eaten him.

stable family units to crack up. And generations of people taking out their anger and guilt, their inadequacy and pain on their children and their children's children help no-one. We need to give our children hope and belief in the power of God's love at the very heart of human life. This is what will help them to create strong relationships, build stable families and restore some sense of community to a fragmented society.

The last story of the Patriarchs is that of Joseph, which you must all know from "The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat." After being sold as a slave, he rose to be Prime Minister of Egypt. He had a warning that famine was coming and so took steps to prepare for this by storing up vast supplies of food during good years. When his brothers turned up to buy food and recognised him, he forgave them the wrong they had done and said that God had turned even their crime and his stupid behaviour to good account because now he, Joseph, had been able to save thousands of people from dying of starvation.

So at the end of the book of Genesis, we see the relationship of God with the natural world; the relationship of God with the human race; the relationships of human being with one another all come together and reach a stage of maturity.

The natural world is not seen any longer as a random chance but as a work of loving genius. There are many dangers and mysteries in it but there is also understanding and creativity. Joseph moved on from the fatalistic attitude of "whatever will be, will be" and accepted the guidance of God in ensuring that people did not go hungry during years of famine. Joseph had also moved on from the "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" attitude, which perpetuates hatred and violence into future generations and found it in himself to forgive his brothers and set them all free from the guilt and resentment they had been carrying. And finally he had moved on from seeing God as an occasional intrusion into his life and accepted him as a guiding power and inspiration throughout his journey: from pampered child to helpless slave to despairing prisoner to powerful Prime Minister.

At the end of the book we see stable homes; close-knit families; a fair and well-ordered society, even some degree of control over the forces of nature and God recognised and welcomed at the heart of all life.

God's people, our people. Their story, our story. Their truth, our truth.

So whatever your story, may the stories of the Patriarchs bring you hope and a new level of trust in God's love.

Amen.