The Gospel and Physical Beauty
Genesis 29:1-35

This morning we're going to look again at how the gospel has the power to turn the world upside down - because, if you remember, that was the charge brought against the early Christians, wasn't it: Acts 17: 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also… saying that there is another king, Jesus.'

And this morning we're going to see how that is true for the whole area of physical, external, beauty and appearance. And the reason for looking at this is that you'd have to be blind not to see that our culture has a huge problem in this area, doesn't it? We're obsessed with external appearance. And that has huge knock on effects, like what you feel about yourself when you look in the mirror, or how you look at other people, and their bodies, or how you weigh up possible marriage partners, or how you view ageing and the aged.

So we're going to look at the story of Jacob and his two wives. And to set the scene, Jacob's running away from home, because he's deceived his father and brother. But Jacob doesn't come from any ordinary home, does he? Abraham is his grandfather; which means Jacob's family is the chosen family, the family through which all nations are going to be blessed. So with every generation, one branch of that family, one father, one mother, one child will bear the messianic seed.

Reading: Genesis 29:1-35.

We're going to look at three things: the dark side of physical beauty; the mask of physical beauty; and the redeeming power of true beauty.

The Dark Side of Physical Beauty
So Jacob's running away, and gets to a well. And around the well are shepherds, sitting with their flocks. So Jacob asks them if they know his uncle Laban, from around this area, and they do - in fact, v6, 'See his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep!'

But as he's standing there, Jacob doesn't get why the shepherds are just sat there, in the heat of the day. Why don't they water the flocks and move off into the shade somewhere? So the shepherds tell him, we can't water them until all the shepherds get here, 'cos it takes all of us to move that stone covering the opening to the well.

And in the time it's taken them to explain Rachel has got nearer with her flock. And did you notice what happens next? Verse 10, 'Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel… Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock.'

So, there are probably three shepherds sat there, saying 'that stone is too heavy for us to move, we need to wait for reinforcements', and Jacob takes one look at Rachel and thinks, 'I'm going to move that stone on my own!' Now guys, if you've ever been handed a jam jar, or something, that your wife, or your mother can't open, and you do it, and she thanks you, and you stay all humble about it, saying 'it's nothing' - this is that on steroids. Jacob is flexing his big biceps to impress the girl.

And afterwards, Rachel takes him home to meet dad, Uncle Laban. And Jacob ends up working for him, for a month, before Laban sits him down for a chat - 'listen, it's not right that you work for me for nothing, how much do you want?'

And then the writer tells us the thing that the whole rest of the story hinges on, v16-17: 'Now Laban had *two* daughters. The name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.'

Now, it doesn't say that Leah's eyes were weak but Rachel had 20/20 vision, does it? It doesn't say that Leah was a bit short-sighted but Rachel could spot a sheep from a goat at 3 kilometres. When it says Leah's eyes were weak, it's comparing her eyes negatively to Rachel's beauty. So there was something about Leah's eyes that made her less attractive than her younger sister, wasn't there. Maybe she squinted, maybe she was cross-eyed, maybe she had bulging eyes, maybe one eye was smaller than the other - we don't know. What we do know is that in comparison to Rachel there was no comparison. Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance - in body and face. But not Leah. In the words of one writer, Leah was the ugly duckling to Rachel's beautiful swan.

And v18, 'Jacob loved Rachel.' And he tells Laban, v18, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

And there lies the problem, doesn't it? Because in that culture, you didn't marry off the younger daughter before the older. But how is Laban ever going to offload Leah when her eyes are so… weak? No-one's ever going to want to marry Leah. So listen to what Laban replies: v19, "It is better that I give her [beautiful, younger Rachel] to you than that I should give her to any other man." But he doesn't actually say he *will* give her to him, does he? He just says, you'd be better than anyone else. But that's not the same as 'you've got a deal, you can have her.'

When I was a junior doctor my boss's secretary had a poster pinned to the wall above her desk. And printed on that poster were the words: 'Age and treachery always triumph over youth and enthusiasm.' In other words, Dr Slack, you might be younger than me, you might be better paid than me, you might even be more intelligent than me… but fear not, a medical secretary always wins. And she was right. And Jacob was young and enthusiastic. But Uncle Laban was old and treacherous. And Derek Kidner says in his commentary that in Laban, Jacob has met his match. Jacob has met someone even more deceitful than him.

But before he discovers that, those seven years fly by, don't they - v20, 'they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.'

And when they were finally up, Jacob cuts to the chase, v21: "Give me my wife that I may go in to her." He doesn't mess around does he? He wants this marriage done so he can get his beautiful bride into bed. So, what does Laban do? He throws a wedding feast, and it's evening, it's dark, and there's been plenty of alcohol flowing, and the bride would have worn a veil, and Laban switches Leah for Rachel.

And in the morning Jacob discovers the truth. And there's a terrible irony here, isn't there? Jacob is fleeing from home because he's tricked his dad into thinking he's the firstborn. And now he is tricked into having firstborn Leah, as a wife.

And Laban has got rid of his problem older daughter, and in the process condemned her to years of misery. And Jacob is made to finish his honeymoon with her, before being given Rachel as well. Verse 30, 'So Jacob went in to Rachel also, *and he loved Rachel more than Leah.*'

Just think about Leah. Think about the situation she now finds herself in. Married and unloved. And worse even than that, she shares her home with her younger, more beautiful sister, who her husband adores - a daily reminder of just how unloved and unlovely she is.

But here's why I want us to look at this. You see, Leah isn't the only one to suffer when we put crushing expectations on external beauty, is she? Last month the Times newspaper published a survey that said that while 9% of British men thought they were handsome, and a further 7% thought they were good looking, only 1% of women described themselves as beautiful and only 2% as good looking.

Just think about that. Only 1 or 2 women in a 100 look in the mirror and like what they see. Because the pressure to look beautiful doesn't empower, it crushes. It distorts how we see ourselves.

Listen to what one clinical psychologist wrote after that report: 'This is a symptom of our times. We might think poor body image is mainly a problem for teenage girls, but it can eat away at women of any age. Psychologically, adults are just as affected as young people by what they see online…. **Whether you're 15 or 45, if you compare yourself to digitally altered images on social media you're bound to come up lacking.'**

But it's not just women, is it? This week I popped into one of the local shopping centres and there's a new shop that is totally given over to selling protein supplements for men to bulk up. And listen to what one male gold-medal winning Olympic track and field athlete said last month: 'My body confidence was so low I didn't take my shirt off for five years. I remember… looking at the other athletes, and feeling so embarrassed about my body. I wasn't overweight or I wouldn't have been able to perform at a high level, *but I didn't have muscle definition*.' And he describes what the article called 'corrosive body anxiety.' And he's an Olympic gold medalist.

But maybe some of you know what that feels like, that you can't match up to the image of what you're supposed to look like.

But this obsession with external beauty also undermines ageing and the elderly. In a recent interview, one actress, who has had a number of cosmetic surgeries, said, 'We live in the era of selfies and having to look perfect. *It would be lovely to just grow old naturally*.' The prophet Isaiah says, 'All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades' (Is 40:6-7) - but we fight that - we fight the transient nature of beauty.

And finally, and maybe this is especially true for young men, it can lead you to reject someone who could make a great marriage partner, because we're only looking for surface beauty and not the beauty that lies beneath. I was once talking to a young guy about porn, and he said (and he sad it sadly), 'you know, I'll never be able to love a normal woman. I'll never be able to look at a normal woman and think, 'you're beautiful.'

So it's not just Leah's life that gets damaged by this, is it? But here's the thing: what's the solution? You see, we could say, 'don't be so superficial, look deeper'. We could say, 'look, all these pictures

you see are just digitally altered images, love your own body'. But it doesn't work, does it? And it doesn't work for a reason.

The Mask of Physical Beauty

Go back to the morning after Jacob's first wedding night, the night when Jacob thought he was getting the woman of his dreams. And look at v25: 'And in the morning, behold, it was Leah!' Jacob thought he was getting Rachel, and if he could have her his life would be complete; but when morning came, behold, it was Leah.

In his commentary, Derek Kidner says, 'The words, behold it was Leah, are the very embodiment of anticlimax, *and this moment a miniature of man's disillusionment*, experienced from Eden onwards.'

In other words, it's always Leah. You think that the thing you dreamed of, the thing you really wanted, the thing you thought would do it for you, is going to make your life complete, is going to fulfil you, and when you get it, it doesn't. Or it does, for a while, but it doesn't last. And you end up disillusioned. In the morning, it's always Leah.

But what about Leah? If Jacob thought that having a beautiful wife would make his life, what does Leah want? Well, did you notice what she calls her first three sons? Because it's tragic. She calls the first one Reuben, which means 'See, a son.' Verse 32, "Because the Lord has looked upon my affliction; *for now my husband will love me.*" 'Look Jacob, I've given you a son. See him and see me, Jacob. Look on me Jacob; tell me I'm beautiful Jacob'. But Jacob doesn't. So when she gives birth to their second son, she calls him Simeon, which sounds like the Hebrew for *heard*. Verse 33, "Because the Lord has heard that I am hated". Hated when she is desperate to be loved.

And then she has a third son, and she calls him Levi, which sounds like the Hebrew for *attached*. Verse 34, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me." Now he'll want me, now he'll draw me near to him.

You see, Jacob thinks his life will shine if he just has beautiful Rachel. But Leah thinks 'I'll be ok if I can just have Jacob's love. If I can just be beautiful in his sight, then I'll be noticed, I'll be someone.'

So both are using external beauty, or the affirmation of another, to answer something deep inside them, aren't they.

And think how we do the same. Only this week I bought a new pair of trousers, and the design on the bag they were given to me in said, 'feel good fashion.' In other words, wear our clothes and you'll feel good about yourself. Now, why use that as an advertising strategy? Because we want to feel good about ourselves, because we don't feel good about ourselves. But if I look good, if I can make myself look beautiful, or hip, then I'll *feel* good. And clothes and hair and make-up and weight-loss become more than just a nice addition, they become a means for you feeling ok about yourself, of covering up that sense that you're not good enough.

Or, maybe guys you think, if I could just get ripped, if I could get those washboard abs, then I'd be able to hold my head up, take my shirt off, win some approving looks.

But it doesn't change the inside, does it? That nagging sense that you're *not* good enough, that when all the externals are stripped away, you don't match up.

Or maybe you think if I could be in a romantic relationship with someone who told me they loved me - then life would be complete. Or if I could get myself a beautiful wife, or a great looking man, I'd feel like someone. But we forget that someone can be beautiful on the outside and not quite so beautiful on the inside, and things don't turn out quite the way we're hoping.

So you discover that getting a wardrobe makeover, or getting ripped, or having a beautiful partner of finding a romantic relationship, ultimately don't answer the deeper longings in your heart. In the morning, it's always Leah.

You see, however much we see the dark side of external beauty, we struggle to change because we hope that in some way it'll cover our sense of inadequacy, or hide our shame, or fulfil our desire to be loved or noticed.

But there's another reason we obsess with the external. And it's simply that we want to stay young. We don't want to age. Because we don't want to die. We're afraid of it.

So we use external beauty, and the affirmation of others that come with it, as a mask to hide the longings and fears beneath.

The Redeeming Power of True Beauty

Leah is totally unloved, isn't she? She has a dad who wants to offload her and pushes her into a marriage that guarantees her misery. And she has a husband who sleeps with her, but doesn't see her.

But she isn't unloved, is she? Look at v31, 'When *the Lord saw* that Leah was hated, he opened her womb.' No one noticed Leah. But God saw her. No one loved Leah. No one would marry Leah, no one would choose Leah. But God chose her, God loved her, God cherished her.

Listen again to what Derek Kidner says, 'God, not Laban has the last word. The deceiver Jacob is deceived *and the despised Leah was exalted to become the mother of… the priestly and kingly tribes of Levi and Judah*.'

You see, did you notice that her third born son was Levi - and from her son, and his tribe, came Moses and every priest and high priest from Aaron downwards. And God chooses Leah, not Rachel, to be their mother.

And then look at her fourth son. Verse 35, 'And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the Lord." Therefore she called his name Judah', which sounds like the Hebrew for praise. And who comes from the tribe of Judah? Jesus, the messiah. In every generation God chose one woman to bear the messianic seed, and God chose Leah, weak-eyed, unloved, unbeautiful Leah, to bear the line of Christ. Her husband doesn't love her, her husband doesn't see her, and its as if God says, then I will. I'll love her and cherish her. I'll be her husband.

And look how she responds. You see, with her first three sons, she's hoping her husband will now notice her. And all along she's been trying to build her self-worth off the love of her husband. But

now, with her fourth son, she says, “This time I will praise the Lord.” And she uses God’s covenant name, YHWH - the God of never-ending, faithful, covenant love. This time I will praise the One whose love is better than a husband’s.

And repeatedly God takes those who no one else would give a second glance to - and chooses them and uses them.

But he does something even more than that, he becomes one of them. You see, in Philippians 2, Paul says that Christ ‘emptied himself’. Jesus gave up all the beauty, all the adulation, all the ‘being noticed’ of heaven, to become like one of us. Listen to what Isaiah says of him, ‘He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him’ (Isaiah 53:2). All those things that normally turn our heads - good looks, outward impressiveness, eye-catching appearance, he had none of those. He laid them aside. And Jesus became a Leah, not a Rachel.

And he healed lepers whose physical appearance made people run from them; and he brought back the outcasts, scarred by sin and shame, and he set free the demonised, and their bodies ravaged by darkness. Everywhere he went he held and touched those whom sin and sickness had made ugly, and he restored them.

And if Jacob the strongman proved his strength by moving a stone over a well to impress a beautiful woman, Jesus faced a far greater stone, didn’t he? - the stone that covered his tomb - the stone that speaks of the ugliness, and finality of death. But Jesus, the ultimate strong man, the One whose strength knows no limits, gave up his strength and became weak. And he endured the ugliness of the cross. And Isaiah says his appearance was so marred, beyond human recognition, that people hid their faces from him. Why? Because at the cross he was bearing all our sin and shame - all our inner ugliness.

And he became ugly to make you beautiful. Not the fleeting, fading beauty of external appearance, but the unfading, inner beauty of a life transformed by his love.

You see, knowing you’re loved by God like that, will change the way you see yourself. The world may not give you a second glance, but God sees you, even behind the mask, right to the bottom, and loves you, and Christ gave himself for you. And as Leah discovered that can set you free from craving the attention of others, or of using external appearance as a way to feel good about yourself. It means you can look in the mirror and know you’re chosen and loved.

Secondly, it’ll change the way you look to things to make you complete. Instead, you’ll get your significance, your security, your purpose in life from Christ and his love for you. And that never wears off by the morning.

But thirdly, and finally, it’ll change the way you look at others - both at the Rachels and the Leahs. You’ll look beyond the surface. You won’t be dazzled by the external, but neither will you turn away from it. You’ll love those the world doesn’t love, and like Christ, give yourself to see true beauty, the beauty of God, restored in them.