

*The struggle of faith*

As we read through the story of God's people, Israel, as it is recorded in the Old Testament we can discern a number of different pictures of the life of faith – metaphors, if you like, for our relationship with God. So for example, at the heart of the Old Testament is the foundational story of Israel's release from slavery, when God led the people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea and into the wilderness and, eventually, into the Promised Land. And God was with them in those wilderness years and that whole episode furnishes us with one very rich image of the life of faith – as a journey which God walks with us, as we learn about ourselves and about God along the way. And Christians through the centuries have gone on pilgrimages in order to live out this sense of faith as a journey. Or again, Israel is sometimes pictured in the Old Testament as God's bride, as God and Israel have entered into a covenant, a commitment to love one another and to be faithful for better, for worse. And that provides the image of a marriage for the life of faith, and Christ's relationship with the Church is pictured in the New Testament as that of a groom to a bride.

Well, our passage this morning from Genesis 32 provides us with another image – of faith as struggle, a wrestling with God, and this strikes an entirely different note. Picturing faith in terms of a journey or a marriage is very encouraging and comforting. In both cases we have the sense of God with us, of God supporting and sustaining us. But faith as a struggle – well, God here is more ambiguous, something of an adversary, and there is a sense of conflict, of God as one who is over against us.

This is a dramatic and mysterious story, with a lack of clarity that only adds to the suspense. Jacob, forefather of the people of Israel, is on his way to a rendezvous with his brother, Esau. If, as I must do, I may crave the indulgence of the smallest quote from a song by the new Nobel Literary Laureate, the magnificent Bob Dylan, Jacob is 'a worried man with a worried mind' – and I challenge anyone to tell me afterwards which song that comes from. Jacob is 'a worried man with a worried mind' because years before he cheated his brother Esau out of a blessing, thus living up to his name, meaning cheat or supplanter. Only now Esau has caught up with him and the scene is set for a showdown at dawn between the two brothers. Jacob is scared as well he might be. He is

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cornered and none of his trickery will help him now. It's payback time and Jacob casts a solitary and lonely shadow as night falls. His entourage of family and servants have been sent away and he is alone in the gathering gloom. Then suddenly - no explanation - this mysterious figure is upon him: 'Jacob was left alone: and a man wrested with him until daybreak.' And there follows this strange kind of dance between these two figures, each clinging to the other. The stranger tries to overcome Jacob but cannot prevail. He tries to break free but cannot escape Jacob's grip. And Jacob holds on, clinging for dear life, pleading for a blessing: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me!' And as the dawn breaks Jacob emerges with his hip out of joint, but with the blessing that he craved - and with a new name: no longer Jacob, the cheat, but Israel, the one who strives with God. But he emerges ignorant of his assailant's name, which he has begged to be told, for in the struggle this man has morphed into God - and no-one knows God's name.

There are so many ways to interpret this story. Who exactly is Jacob wrestling with? Is he wrestling with his fears, his fear of Esau? Is this figure, at least to begin with, Esau himself - as Jacob anticipates a fight with his brother? Or does the stranger represent Jacob's troubled, haunted conscience? Well, maybe these things and more but in and through them all this stranger is God. And that helps us in the interpretation of the story for it could be said that this scene pictures the relationship between God and Jacob's seed, the people of Israel. God and Israel are locked in an embrace, that covenant that was cut with Moses on Mt Sinai and that binds God and Israel together. But at times this seems less of an embrace and more of a fight. And at times God longs to break free of Israel for Israel is unfaithful and sinful and God wants out of the deal. And at times Israel wants out for too often God's hold upon her seems to be more of a curse than a blessing, more pain than joy. And if this is a picture of Israel's conflicted relationship with her God then it is equally a picture of the whole human race's dealings with God, the ambiguity of our yearnings for God and yet our resistance against God. When it comes to God, humanity generally is torn between fighting and embracing. And, like Israel, humanity comes away from the encounter bruised and wounded, limping, for it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God and we bear the marks of our conflict with a holy God. But the profoundest mystery of all - not revealed in this story - is that in the Christian Gospel it is not just Israel who walks away from the

encounter with God limping, and it's not just humanity that walks away wounded: no, God does too. God emerges from the encounter with scars.

So that is something of the depth and richness of this story. But go back to where we began and think of this as a story of faith as a struggle, as a wrestling. And the first thing to say is that there is something of this at the very heart of the Christian life for in every Christian there is a struggle going on. You see, I suggest that it's significant that his incident takes place by a stream called Jabbok, for the presence of water gives the incident certain baptismal associations. We're told that Jacob crosses the ford of Jabbok and there the wrestling takes place. And before the encounter he is Jacob and after it he is Israel and so there is a deep change that has come over him. In a sense he is a different person, a new person. And that is exactly what happens in baptism. As we enter the water we die and we rise to new life, to a new identity. In baptism an old person is put to death and a new person is reborn into new life. And the life of the baptised continues that pattern of dying and rising. The life of the baptised is a constant putting to death of our old nature. It's a constant dying to our old self that is estranged from God – and it's a constant birthing of a new nature, a rising as a new person, the new self that is reconciled to God. But that dying to the old and rising to the new is a struggle and that is an ongoing feature of the life of faith. Every day, every moment is a struggle between the old and the new. The old self keeps coming back, keeps asserting itself. We wrestle.

I would suggest, however that, beyond baptism, this incident is a text for all who struggle with faith in one way or another. To return to where I started, the life of faith can be a pilgrimage, a joyous journey of discovery, a walk with God who accompanies us along the way, yes. And the life of faith can be a marriage – a profound intimacy between us and God in which we savour God's love and grace every day, yes. But faith can also be a struggle. It may be a struggle with doubt, a wrestling with beliefs that we long to embrace but which we often find unbelievable. How do we reconcile a God of love in heaven with the hell on earth of Aleppo? How do we square what we believe about God with what we witness and experience every day? So that strange figure who Jacob wrestles in the dark may be the shadow of doubt. Or the life of faith may involve a struggle with a God who seems unresponsive to our prayers. How good that this passage from Genesis this morning has been paired with the text in Luke about prayer – about the widow who pleads for justice

with a corrupt and unresponsive judge, bugging him until he finally relents. And the point of the parable is that God is not corrupt and curmudgeonly like the judge, having to be shamed into responding. So Jesus encourages us to keep praying, to persist and not to lose heart, to cry to him day and night. But we can't help but wonder sometimes why it has to be like this. Why does prayer have to be such a struggle? Why must we cry day and night? 'Knock and the door shall be opened', says Jesus, but sometimes we knock until our knuckles bleed and even then the door remains tight shut. Why? And what of Jesus' remark at the conclusion of the parable, 'yet, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith in earth?' Maybe that is a recognition that many eventually give up the struggle – give up wrestling with doubt, give up wrestling in prayer, give up on faith. It all becomes too much.

I don't want to sow doubts in your mind – far from it. And if your faith is doubt-free then praise God. If your walk with God is a joyful pilgrimage or a consummated marriage then hallelujah: be grateful. But this morning this passage is for the strugglers, the wrestlers. This morning this passage is for the baptised who struggle to put to death the old and to live in the new. This morning this passage is for those for whom faith is no easy ride, sapped as it is by doubt. Today this passage is for those for whom God can sometimes feel like an adversary. Maybe that's you, and if so I would just say this. At the end of the story, before he limps off to meet Esau, he names the place of this encounter Peniel, meaning the face of God, for, Jacob says, he has seen the face of God. We can't imagine what he saw. Elsewhere God's Word tells us that no-one can see the face of God and live. So what strange visage did he see in the pale light of dawn? Who knows? But we do know this. As Christians we believe that we have seen the face of God in Jesus Christ. We have seen there the face of God there and it shines with grace and truth. It is etched with grace. In that face we see that God is no adversary – not one who is not against us but one who for us. And if your faith is a struggle be encouraged by that. Yes, we struggle with mystery. But Jesus has given that mystery a face and a name – and to us he gives an invitation to trust. Amen.