

Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

20.10.19

Wrestling until Daybreak

The great 16th century Reformer, John Calvin, spoke of the human mind as an idol factory – by which he meant that human beings have a strong inclination to create God in our own image. We like to imagine God as we would like God to be, and we end up with an idol of our own making. So it is that it is not uncommon in Christian circles to find God portrayed as a sort of Mary Poppins – a kindly figure who comes along to tidy up our mess, to put things right, to comfort and to reassure us and to give us peace, joy and affirmation. And by such idolatry God is tamed, domesticated, and if that is your take on God then this morning's passage may be a little unsettling.

What we have here 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. And Jacob is a worried and troubled man, because years before he cheated his brother Esau out of a blessing, thus living up to his name, which means 'cheat' or 'trickster'. 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 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 across the river and he is alone in the gathering gloom. Then suddenly - no explanation – it is as if Jacob is mugged. Out of the dark this mysterious weight is upon him. And there follows a desperate struggle 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 craves – and with a new name: no longer Jacob, the cheat, but Israel, the one who strives with God.

So what on earth are we to make of this story? What is going on here on the darkness by the ford of Jabbok? Well, let me propose to you that we might consider this story in two ways. Firstly, let me suggest that what we have here is a picture of the nation of Israel in its conflicted and tempestuous relationship

with God. Israel's story, remember, begins with a people who are rescued from captivity in the land of Egypt. And God enters into a covenant with them, saying 'I will be your God and you will be my people', binding God and Israel together in union. But the story of God and Israel is uneven and fraught. At times they seem to be locked in an embrace, passionate and tender. And at times they seem to be held in a kind of divine dance, their steps choreographed in unison. But at times they seem to be caught in a life or death struggle, God wrestling with an intransigent and faithless Israel: Israel resisting God and God resisting Israel, tempted but yet refusing to let go. And the experience of exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC seemed to be the nadir of their relationship, as all that Israel held dear was snatched from them and they were brutally defeated by their enemies. And Israel emerges from exile broken, wounded, but limping on to a new chapter in the story.

But then, secondly, let me suggest that this narrative gives us a deeper insight into the extraordinary God who we meet in Israel's story. Here, after all, is a God who comes to us and engages with us and locks arms with us. This is not the holy, distant God far above and beyond the world. This is God in the fray, God in the mud and the blood, God getting down and dirty with us, reaching out, grasping, rubbing up against our flesh. This is God determined to subdue us and to take us captive, resolved to overcome our resistance. This is God coming to us in our guilt and our shame - like Jacob - and binding us in the fierce grip of grace, refusing to allow us to shake him off. And when the stranger pleads with Jacob to let him go for the day is breaking this surely is out of concern for Jacob, lest he see the face of God in the clear light of day and so perish. And this is the God who will finally come to us, revealing his face, and getting down and dirty with us, binding himself to us with ropes and nails.

So there are two ways of reading the story – a graphic image of Israel's history, and of Israel's God. But the story goes far deeper than that. Clearly it is a story about struggle, and here I want to note that at the beginning of the narrative the figure in the dark is described as a man: a man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. And read this way the story could be seen as symbolising Jacob's wrestling with himself: the man who he struggles with his own shadow, his own self. And we surely recognise here one feature of sin for, you see, sin does many things: sin sets against us against God, separating us from our Creator; and sin sets us against our fellow human beings, estranging us

from one another, estranging Jacob from Esau. But sin also sets us against ourselves, alienating us from ourselves - such that I am not a peace with the person who stares back at me every morning from the mirror. And I long to be at peace with myself, to be reconciled with me! And one feature of my estrangement from myself is my conscience: when I know that I have done what I ought not to have done or have failed to do what I ought to do. And at one level Jacob here is wrestling with his conscience. He is haunted by his wronging of Esau. And when you are by nature a cheat and a crook your rear view mirror continually reflects the car crashes that you leave in your wake, and somewhere deep down you suffer the pangs of a troubled conscience that will not give you peace - peace with yourself.

There is, however, more to this conflict with ourselves that this passage portrays, for one intriguing feature of this story is that it has baptismal overtones. Note that all this takes place by the ford of Jabbok, and Jacob sends his family across the brook at the start of the story and then returns for the night, only to re-cross the stream the next day to meet Esau. Here is baptismal imagery. And baptism recognises that in each and every one of us there are two selves – an old self, an inauthentic self, an estranged self that is not really me at all and that must die. And baptism proclaims that this old self has been sentenced to death – in fact it has been crucified with Christ, nailed to the cross with Jesus. And what emerges out of baptism is my true self, my reconciled self, my authentic self which is really me as God knows me and which rises with Christ. But in the Christian life there is a struggle between the two selves. My old, estranged self keeps coming back, seeking to usurp my identity. And so I struggle between the old and the new and this is what is happening with Jacob. In this struggle Jacob is given a new name, a new identity. Jacob, the old self, the cheat the twister, is renamed Israel, one who strives with God and while they yet struggle, it is Israel who will finally prevail, praise God. And that is the story of your life and mine. Jacob wrestling portrays, portrays our conflict with ourselves.

But as we move on in the narrative we find that this stranger in the night is no mere man, for it morphs into God, such that Jacob concludes that in this struggle he has seen God face to face, and lived to tell the tale. And we might think therefore of all the ways in which the life of faith is a struggling not just with ourselves but also with God: a wrestling, perhaps, with the will of God when we find it hard to cope with what life sends us; or a wrestling with

doubt which assails us, not least - like Jacob - in the dark hours of sorrow or despair. And we struggle with God at times in prayer when we feel a bit like Jacob, pleading for blessing and God seems reticent and reluctant and unresponsive. This of course is the thrust of our reading from Luke's Gospel this morning, the story of the widow banging on the door of the judge. And who has not felt like that sometimes with God? We feel that our knuckles are raw from banging on God's door but still it remains shut, the lights out. To return to where we began, here is no Mary Poppins God who waves her wand and puts everything right. Here is a God whose face will not be seen and whose name will not be known and who cannot be tamed and domesticated and made to dance to our tune. This is the mysterious God, the elusive God of Jacob. And what we must admire here is Jacob's tenacity, his determination. There is a zeal for God here in Jacob that addresses us, a passion and a yearning that is prepared to struggle and to persist and not to let go. And of course we cannot read this passage without thinking of another figure who wrestled with God in the night, struggling with the will of God, struggling and grappling in prayer until he sweated blood - but in whom God's will was done.

Do you know what it means to struggle with yourself? Do you know what is it to be locked in combat with that dark imposter who pretends to be you and who you yearn to be released from? And do you know what it means to wrestle with God – to wrestle with the will of God, to wrestle in prayer, to wrestle with God's absence, God's silence, to wrestle in the dark? Well, learn from this story. God is with you in the struggle, binding himself to you and refusing to let you go. This is the God of peace but whose peace comes only after the night of wrestling when we refuse to give up. This is the God who after the night of struggle walks with us, across the river, to face our fears – limping as we go, but with our wounds slowly being transformed to scars. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
Creator of all, lover of all that you have made,
God who is faithful to all that you have made.
We praise and worship you, we bless your holy name.
You have made us to be yours,
and in Jesus Christ you have reached out to us
and drawn us to yourself;
and in Jesus Christ you have wrapped your arms around us
and embraced us, and held us firm in your love.

O God forgive us that we struggle to break free.
Forgive us that we resist you and strive with you –
and so we damage ourselves
and we bring harm to your world.

O God, we come to you this morning crying out for blessing,
yearning for the blessing of forgiveness, and healing;
the blessing of release from guilty consciences,
the blessing of grace that makes us new.

And we praise you for the assurance that you hear our cry,
and that you will not let us go.

So bless us, Lord, in this time here,
and may we go from this place in peace.
We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord
and in the words that he taught us we pray together, saying...