

Jacob's ladder

The man we encounter in our reading from the Book of Genesis is a sad and a lonely figure. The passage places him at eventide, in the falling dark, at a place that in retrospect he will call 'Bethel', which means 'the house of God'. We read that 'He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set'. And that twilight mood expresses not just this man's surroundings but also the state of his soul. His name is Jacob and he is a key player in God's plan of salvation for the world, but you would hardly know it. The name 'Jacob' means cheat or supplanter and in the previous chapters of this story he has been living up to his name, for Jacob is a man who makes sure he gets what he wants, irrespective of deceit and of the cost to anyone else. And so we find that he has hoodwinked his father and cheated his twin brother Esau who is enraged and has vowed to kill him. And Jacob has fled his home and is now on the run.

So there he is - alone, away from home, a man in flight from his past and in fear of his future, and there can hardly be a more lonely place to lay down your head for the night. It's somehow appropriate that his pillow is a rock, for truly this is a hard place to which Jacob has come.

Then comes the dream, and we can surely understand why God has to speak to Jacob this way - how else could God possibly get through to him? After all, in dreams we are passive. In dreams we yield to our subconscious. We have no control at all over our dreams - they come to us from deep layers of our psyche and we cannot stave off the worlds that come to us in the dark depths of the night. But it's precisely then, when we are passive and no longer in control, that God can come to us and address us. And that is true of Jacob. He, after all, is a control freak. Cheat by name and cheat by nature he is a manipulator of his world, forever calculating strategies and outcomes. And if God is going to get through all that, if God is going to find a way through that shield, then Jacob must be incapacitated: out of it. Only then can God speak to Jacob through the din of his own schemes. Only then can God penetrate Jacob's defences. Only then can God steal past the sentries Jacob has posted to patrol his life. And only then can God move Jacob on from the past that haunts him and into the future that awaits him.

So Jacob sleeps, his head on the rock, and Jacob dreams. And what does he see? Well, he sees this ladder, linking heaven and earth and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it, and he hears God speaking words of promise and reassurance. And suddenly Jacob's bed becomes holy ground and this desolate and lonely place is transfigured and it becomes Bethel, the house of God, and Jacob declares, 'surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it'. So how might this strange encounter address us today? What might it have to say to us?

Well, firstly, it tells us something about Jesus, pointing forward to him. After all, for Christians it is Jesus who links heaven and earth. For Christians Jesus is the ladder spanning heaven and earth and upon which God has descended and ascended. Indeed, Jesus actually drew on this very passage to describe himself. Near the beginning of his ministry, and using the title 'Son of Man' by which he referred to himself, he said to one of his followers, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' He saw himself as Jacob's ladder. And it's interesting that in verse 13 of this passage we read of Jacob in that lonely place that 'the Lord stood beside him'. So the assumption is that Jacob sees the Lord standing beside him, at the foot of the ladder. But Hebrew, the language in which this passage was originally written, is wonderfully fluid and imprecise and those words can equally well be read not as 'the Lord stood beside him' but as 'the Lord stood above him'. So on that reading the Lord is at the top of the ladder. So which is it? Is God at the top or at the bottom?

Well, of course for Christians it is both. For Christians the eternal God sits enthroned high above the earth, exalted over all - but is also to be found incarnate, enfleshed, at the foot of the ladder, in Jesus. The ambiguity of the passage captures beautifully the mystery of a sovereign God who is above and beyond in the heights but who will be found with us, in Christ, in the depths. And Jacob declares on waking: 'surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it' for this, after all,

was the last place that Jacob might expect to meet God, in some dark, unfamiliar territory. And you could say, as many did, the same of Jesus of Nazareth, that he is the last place you might expect to meet God: in this Galilean peasant in some backwater of the Roman Empire. Here is the last place you might expect to encounter God, in a crucified criminal charged with sedition and heresy. Yet the verdict of Christians, looking at the life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, is that, indeed, ‘the Lord was in this place and we did not know it – but we know it now.’

So the passage tells us about Jesus, but it also tells us something about the Church. I’m intrigued that after this strange experience Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow and set it up as a pillar and consecrated it with an offering of oil upon it. And so it becomes a holy place, set apart for the presence of God and for traffic between heaven and earth. And of course God is everywhere and always close at hand. We began our service this morning with those beautiful words from psalm 139, ‘Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol - that is, in the underworld - you are there’. Yes, that psalm reminds us that heaven and earth are always but a breath apart - and yet there are nevertheless special places that are associated with God’s presence and the worship of God’s people and which are set apart to be open to God, and where the Holy Spirit of God flies betwixt and between like the angels in the dream.

There is a beautiful old English word, ‘trysting’ which means meeting – especially between lovers - and a trysting place is an often secret place where lovers meet and which becomes special for that reason. Maybe some of you have such trysting places in your lives and memories, and perhaps they’re not as mysterious and romantic as Bethel. I recall a trysting place where Sally and I met on occasion in our student days: Brattisani’s fish and chip shop in Edinburgh! Well, the church is a trysting place. It’s an appointed place set apart for a lovers’ tryst between us and God and where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name the ladder is raised, and heaven is open and prayer and worship are offered and praises and blessings ascend descend and we sense that somehow, surely, the Lord is in this place. And even now, in this lockdown, with the church closed, our sitting rooms and coffee tables suddenly become Bethels. And we need such trysting places, where the veil between heaven and earth is torn open and earth lies exposed to heaven. Ours is a world, after all, that is turned in upon itself. It is a world that is battened down and closed to God, and it needs places where it is prised open and the roof pulled back and the angels come and go. It’s like opening a window on a closed and stuffy world and letting in the fresh air of heaven.

The story, then, speaks of Jesus, and of the Church, but it surely also addresses us individually. We began by thinking of Jacob’s life as being in a dark place as he settles down here for the night. He is haunted by guilt, for a start – by his conniving and his cheating and his treatment of others. And it seems he is fearful of the threat of retribution: his brother Esau has serious scores to settle and is coming after him. And maybe he feels he has lost touch with his purpose in life, his destiny: called as he is to carry forward great promises made by God to his grandfather Abraham. In many ways Jacob here is a broken man, isolated, cut off from God and from his family by his own folly. And yet it is in that twilight place where the sun is setting on his life that God comes to him in the depths of his soul, in the land of sleep where deep calls to deep, and God speaks words of reassurance, ‘Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.’ And to his surprise Jacob finds himself uttering words of astonishment: ‘Surely, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.’

I would dare to say that this is the testimony of Christians time and time again. Of course, as with Jacob, it’s always in retrospect. We often do not know it at the time. The experience might be one of fear or loneliness or abandonment. It may be one of unimaginable loss, or of hurt, or of deep regret, or of betrayal. It may be that painful place where we come face to face with our own stupidity, our own failure, the damage we do to ourselves and to others and the guilt that comes with it. In such dark places it’s hard to sleep. But there comes that time of awakening when we find ourselves saying, ‘surely, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.’ And we call that place Bethel, the house of God. May Jacob’s experience be yours. Amen.

Blessed and loving God,
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
God of Rebecca and Rachel and Mary – and Jesus,
we worship and praise you – faithful, trustworthy God.
We praise you for your commitment to the world you love;
we praise you for your promises
to bring salvation and healing to your world;
We praise you that in Jesus Christ heaven and earth
are connected and bound together,
open to each other and united in your love.
O God, we need you to open up a way between
heaven and earth, for our world lies separated from you,
turned in upon itself, resistant to you.
And we confess that we are turned in ourselves,
and we turn away from you and from our neighbour
and from your call.
O God come to us in your forgiving love;
open our lives to you and your Holy Spirit
and make us your dwelling place.
We pray in Jesus' name and we pray in the words
Jesus taught us, saying together...