



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



# TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

## 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle. Genesis 32:22-32*

*7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, 9 persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, 10 always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11 For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us but life in you. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12*

## Wrestling with God

Well, a fair amount has happened since our passage last week. We've actually skipped a whole chunk of the story. If you were here, you'll remember that Esau was on a murderous rampage and so Jacob was fleeing for his life and about to seek refuge with his uncle Laban until his brother's fury had subsided.

Now, as we pick up the story again, years have passed. Jacob is on the way back to meet his brother Esau for the first time in the hope of being reconciled to him. Everything is on the line.

And on his way, he has this bizarre encounter with a stranger, who wrestles with him throughout the night. Often, it's assumed that this stranger is an angel, but the story doesn't actually say so. In fact, Jacob's words suggest that this struggle was nothing less than an encounter with God. "For I have seen God face-to-face," he says after the struggle, "and yet my life was preserved."

Have you noticed, there's a beautiful symmetry to Jacob's story; because the last encounter Jacob had with God was as he fled from this brother all those years ago. And now as he returns, he once more confronts his God. But this time the encounter is very different.

In both cases, Jacob's encounters with God prove instrumental and transformative on his way from and back to his brother.

For instance, the story of Jacob's heavenly dream, which we heard last week, is a story in which God comforts Jacob as he flees into the unknown. Over the course of the dream, not only is he reassured that God is with him, but he also receives the strength to carry on, God's words of promise anticipating Jacob's future success and prosperity with his uncle Laban.

But now on his way back home to his estranged brother Esau, Jacob must finally confront his fears – fears that he'd been running away from – and put himself at the mercy of his brother. The encounter with God this time is very different. There's no angelic ladder to heaven. No restful dream. No comforting words of assurance.

No, this time, God appears as a stranger. And Jacob struggles with him through the whole night as he confronts his deepest fears, seeking to overcome them; the struggle with God anticipating the imminent confrontation to come with his brother.

And Jacob was terrified. In fact, the story today suggests, he was about to run away yet again rather than confront his fears; and it was the confrontation with the stranger that changed his mind. We're told, he had sent his family and everything he owned over the river into the land of his brother. But Jacob couldn't bring himself to cross over. To cross that point of no return and put himself in his brother's hands.

And so while his family – the fruit of God's blessing, his whole future – carried on ahead of him, he sat alone on the far side of the river, paralysed by his fears, contemplating whether to throw it all away. And it was here that God came to wrestle with him through the night.

Over the course of the struggle, it appears Jacob gets the upper hand and demands to be blessed; to which the stranger responds by gifting Jacob a new name, Israel, which means “one who has struggled with God and with people and has prevailed.”

Certainly, an apt name not only for Jacob, but for the nation of Israel that was his progeny.

You know, the Bible is so well known and has so profoundly shaped our world today that it's easy for us to assume that Israel was bigger, or stronger, or more important than it actually was in the ancient world.

The reality was the quite the opposite. It's a bit of a miracle that the Holy Scriptures of Israel and not Babylon or Egypt or Assyria have become the most widely read and influential scriptures in history. The nation of Israel was a very small fish in a very large pond. Countless other similar sized nations were wiped off the face of the earth or engulfed by the majority culture of larger nations.

If it wasn't jostling for space among other small nation states, it was being dominated by a succession of ruthless empires from the south or the east, or it was being raided by pirates from the west and the north.

And it was this constant struggle for existence that profoundly shaped Israel's relationship with God. Remember our Psalm earlier? How long, O Lord, will you forget us? How long will you let our enemies prevail?

This struggle is at the heart of the Old Testament scriptures as generation after generation of the people of Israel grapple with the reality of their insignificance and powerlessness.

These are not the stories of a victorious Empire, whose gods are the personification of power and success. No, these are the origin stories of a people learning to come to terms with their powerlessness and their transience and their brokenness, who time and again return to the question: where or who is the God in the midst of our experience?

On one level, then, this story about Jacob is a story about Israel's origins and its identity as a nation. We learn that this is a people who, at their core, are destined to struggle with their God (how often do we think about faith in that way? ... a struggle with God).

Our situation is obviously markedly different. Thank goodness we don't live in those bloodthirsty and ruthless times. And yet, how rich are the scriptures that arose out of this bitter struggle with God and with people! How relevant are the Psalms or the stories of Genesis to our own life experiences? These scriptures that continue to bring us face-to-face with our own humanity in all its breadth and depth.

Maybe it's not so absurd after all that these scriptures survived and continue to breathe new life into countless millions.

...There was a particular reason why I chose Rembrandt's version of Jacob's wrestling match. There are any number of artistic renditions of this biblical story. What do notice about Rembrandt's version?

The thing that struck me is that it doesn't really look like they're fighting. In fact, it looks more like a tender embrace. The angel holds Jacob's full weight. He's holding him up like a child. Jacob could be sleeping or even dead.

I wonder if Rembrandt was trying to say something profound about the nature of this struggle for Jacob; that, in order for him to be reconciled to his brother Esau, he needed to stop running, confront his own powerlessness, and to put himself at the mercy of his brother.

This is what his struggle entails. Giving up control. Becoming powerless and vulnerable in order to open up the possibility of healing and forgiveness. It's this that I think Rembrandt captures so brilliantly.

To me, there's something about this story that is later echoed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before Jesus was crucified. Like Jacob, Jesus entered into a bitter struggle with God. While his disciples slept, Jesus prayed through the night, sweating tears of blood and begging God to take his cup of suffering from him. Like Jacob, Jesus needed to confront his deepest fears and to trust God; to

make himself powerless even to death on a cross so that reconciliation and peace would become possible.

In fact, for me, it's easy to imagine that Rembrandt is here depicting Jesus dressed in blood red, resting in the arms of an angel as he accepted his imminent suffering and death. Here is the new Israel, the one who struggles with God for the blessing of the world and prevails.

Our New Testament reading today from 2 Corinthians suggests that to be a follower of Christ is to share in this struggle. We are grafted into the people of Israel and as such we are a people struggling with God too. To be the church is to be a people who together struggle with our God. A people who are learning to confront our deepest fears, learning to make ourselves vulnerable – bringers of love and peace – in order to open up a new future together.

This is the profound insight that Paul is alluding to in our reading today; an insight that has its inception way back in the roots of the Old Testament and the experiences of the people of Israel. That is, through embracing our powerlessness and woundedness, we can become a source of love and healing in the world. There is blessing in the struggle. Such is the transformative power of grace.

If Jacob is anything to go by, then we should know this process of confronting our fears is not at all easy. Esau could well have killed Jacob. And in fact, the enemies of Jesus did kill him. There is a legitimate danger in putting ourselves at the mercy of others.

But I think Paul would say, this is the struggle of faith. Or as he put it in 2 Corinthians: *“For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible. So, death is at work in us but life in you.”*

May death be at work in us, that God’s life may shine through us all the more.

Amen

