

TO WRESTLE WITH THE DIVINE

Genesis 32. 22 – 31

2 Timothy 3. 14-4. 5

Luke 18. 1 – 8

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

And so it has come to this. Jacob, the heel-grabber, the schemer, the wheeler and the dealer, the sneak and the crook, is coming home. Deception and craftiness stand like bookends on either side of the last twenty years of Jacob's life. Previously he had fled Canaan, after having deceived his father Isaac, and after having robbed his twin brother Esau of his all-important birthright and paternal blessing.

Now Jacob is coming back to Canaan, but he's still running. Lately it had been the turn of Laban, Jacob's uncle and father-in-law, to be fleeced by Jacob in a multitude of ways over the past two decades. Of course, old Laban wasn't entirely innocent: he had pulled as many dirty tricks on Jacob as Jacob had pulled on him; and after having wriggled out of yet another noose that Laban had dangled in front of him, Jacob is now coming back home.

And what about Esau? Did he still bear a grudge? Years earlier, Jacob had left Canaan with nothing but the clothes on his back; and now, he was returning home as a wealthy man, with vast flocks and herds. Jacob was convinced that he could talk his way out of almost anything, and if you combined his slick rhetoric with a hefty bribe, it just might be enough to extinguish the fires of Esau's rage.

As Genesis 32 opens, Jacob's messengers inform him that Esau is coming to meet his brother, but that he is not alone. He is accompanied by four hundred men. Quickly, Jacob divides the people and animals with him into two groups, so that if

Esau comes and attacks one group, the other may escape. And Jacob prays. He prays to the God of Abraham and of his father Isaac, asking God to save him from the hand of his brother Esau. He dispatches gifts of goats, rams, cows, camels and donkeys to be given to Esau to appease him. And wanting to save his loved ones from danger, Jacob then sends his wives, children and possessions ahead of him across the River Jabbok.¹

Once again, true to form, Jacob is using his wits to survive; and he is not bothered about letting the ends justify the means. Yes, he has prayed to God; but he has also very much taken matters into his own hands, to see if he can devise a way out of what looks to be a perilous encounter. Night has now fallen; and Jacob is left alone. All he can do is wait and contemplate his life and his fate. This may possibly be the last evening of his life.

And that's when it happened. Out of the shadows of the night, a strong and strange man jumps at Jacob. Is it Esau? Is it a vagrant robber? Whoever it is, the man is very strong. Jacob throws his best punches and wrestles the man to the ground more than once, but each time he does so, the man wriggles free and sends Jacob flying back into the mud of the river bank. It goes on like this for hours, and seems to go on for ever. Just as he is about to rush towards the dark stranger once again, the man simply brushes his hand over Jacob's hip, and he immediately feels a searing, wrenching pain. His hip has been dislocated. And the man says, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob says, 'No...not unless you bless me.' Even in this strange nocturnal encounter, Jacob doesn't want to come out empty-handed.

But he doesn't get a blessing, at least not immediately. Instead, the stranger asks, 'What is your name?' And when Jacob replies, the man says, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have striven with God and with humans,

¹ An eastern tributary of the Jordan River, a little more than 30km north of the Dead Sea; the River Jabbok was a frontier point for the Promised Land (cf. Deut 3. 16).

and have prevailed.² When Jacob pleads, ‘Please, tell me your name’, the man only says, ‘Why is it that you ask me my name?’ (which is another way of saying, ‘I think you know very well who I am’). Indeed, Jacob knows who he is. For the past few hours, Jacob has actually been rolling around in the dirt with God.³ Then the man blesses Jacob and leaves.

The story of Jacob wrestling with God is a fascinating one that leaves us with many questions. A first question that we can ask is, ‘What was *actually* happening during this struggle?’ If we look at the struggle from God’s standpoint, we notice is that he is the one who actually initiated the wrestling match. He did so for a purpose: he initiated it because he wanted to pass on certain messages to Jacob. He wanted Jacob to understand, on a very deep level, that God is the Master of the Universe, and that Jacob wasn’t, in spite of all his manipulation, scheming and deceit. But let us make a very careful distinction: in this wrestling match, God was not struggling so much *against* Jacob, as *with* him, and *alongside* him. He initiated this struggle so that Jacob would look squarely at himself; and as Jacob did that, God wanted to be alongside him and with him. He wanted to be with Jacob as he faced his egotism, his sinfulness and his ultimate powerlessness to be the true master of his circumstances and future.

There will come a time (if there hasn’t already) in your life and mine, when we have to face the truth about ourselves and our lives; a time when we have to look honestly at our plans for ourselves and what we hope to become. And when that time comes, we know that it is not we, or our plans that really determine who we will be in the future. It is God. Thankfully, God does not abandon us to our own devices, no matter what mistakes we’ve made in the past. No, as we face our true selves and perhaps surrender our ideas about who we are, God allows us to grab

² It may also be said that Jacob ‘overcame’ in the sense that he ‘saw God face to face and yet (his) life was spared’ (32. 30). Cf. Ex 33. 20; Nu 12. 8; Judg 13. 22.

³ This is further attested in Hos 12. 3-5.

hold of his hand. He then pulls us up and sends us off to embrace the promises that *he* has for our lives.

A second question that we can ask about this story is, ‘Why did God give Jacob a new name?’ There are different meanings that can be given to the name Israel. It can mean ‘triumphant with God’, or ‘he who prevails with God’; but it can also mean ‘*God rules*’. Jacob was given the name Israel not only because he had successfully struggled with God, but also because from now on, this future patriarch of God’s people would not survive by his cunning and wits; he would follow God in the eternal plans and purposes he had for him and for the people who would bear this new name.

You will remember that in the Jewish tradition, names were intended to communicate something about a person’s character. Indeed, the name Jacob means ‘trickster’ or ‘grabber’, and this Jacob certainly was. But following his wrestle with God on the bank of the River Jabbok, Jacob is given a new name because he is a new person. A new man has been formed. Jacob has been literally transformed. He is for ever changed.⁴ The old trickster has become nothing less than God’s treasure. The one who was born grasping the *heel* of his twin brother Esau would become the one through whom God would bring *healing* to his people. From the body of Jacob now called Israel, a nation and a community of nations would come; and a line of kings would be born. And Jacob now called Israel and his descendants would lead the people of God into the land that Yahweh had promised them.

You see, that famous evening, when Jacob wrestled with God at the River Jabbok and received his blessing, he encountered (in the most unexpected and surprising

⁴ This transformation in Jacob is seen later in his dealings with his children, and in the counsel he later gives to Joseph. It is also shown that he goes to his grave in Egypt as a beloved and respected old man. The individual who left God at Peniel was not the same conniver who bargained with God at Bethel.

way) God's transforming grace and mercy. In those long, seemingly endless hours of struggle, as Jacob looked at himself, at his life and at who he really was, God who was *struggling there alongside him* showed him, in figurative terms at least, his face: a face of pure holiness and goodness; a face of unconditional love; a face of unfathomable grace. The briefest look into that face of goodness, love and grace made all striving and cunning unnecessary.⁵

In a sense, Peniel on the bank of the River Jabbok is where you and I live every day. Not because God wants us necessarily to repeat Jacob's struggle; but because even as Jacob limped away as dawn broke at Peniel, so you and I are constantly invited to keep our eyes on the Saviour who walked away from his grave on Easter morning with still-pierced feet. Our Lord bore on his resurrected body the marks of this world's defeat, changed by the power of the grace of God into the most glorious victory.

Every time that you and I look into the face of the Saviour that was once framed with a crown of thorns, we like Jacob are completely undone. As we acknowledge our sinfulness, our selfish desires and our powerlessness to control our lives, we receive the life-changing and transforming grace that God gives. This morning and every morning, we can grab hold of God's hand and then step into the new life he has prepared for us.

Amen.

⁵ This helps us to better understand Jacob's words (Gen 33. 10) when he meets his brother Esau and encounters his graceful forgiveness.