

AND JACOB WAS LEFT ALONE

Genesis 32. 22-31

2 Timothy 3. 14-17, 4. 1-5

Luke 18. 1-8

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

Jacob was a complex character, but hey, we know about complex characters. We've all met them. Jacob was the second-born, but he emerged from the womb clutching the heel of his brother. Through deception, he gained the blessing that by right was that of his brother. Fleeing for his life, Jacob took up residence with his distant kinsman Laban. He worked seven years to take Laban's younger daughter Rachel as his wife, but then was himself deceived, awakening to find Leah in his marriage bed instead of Rachel. Jacob worked another seven years for Rachel and then six more, finally leaving Laban (a manipulative father-in-law, to say the least) with further deception in his wake. Jacob, a struggler who has lived by struggle, now finds himself with a large family, a host of servants, flocks and herds and camels; and he returns to his homeland where he will have to face . . . his brother.

I wonder, what does Jacob think as he returns to his brother? That he might be killed? That must have been something he thought of, as he reckoned the possibilities. Jacob divides his entourage, flocks, herds and camels into two groups, so that if his brother comes upon him and destroys the one, the other would still survive.

But does Jacob in fact fear his own death? With everyone throughout his life up to this point, Jacob has struggled and prevailed. He has struggled over his father's blessing; he has struggled over Rachel; he has struggled over the terms of his business with Laban. Jacob has always been a wrestler, and in the end (if I may put it this way) he has always been a victor. Should it come to forceful conflict now with his

brother, might Jacob not fear that he would be killed, but think rather that he would prevail? Do you think that he thought that he would kill his brother?

We need to think about this, not because we may have something against our brother, but rather because wisdom has something to teach us. It is a much worse thing to commit a crime than to be the victim of a crime. No harm that can come us can compare with the harm we do to our soul when we commit a wrong. It is far worse to kill than wrongly to be killed. I think about this because of the way this story began. In the story of which Jacob is a part, the first sin is that of disobedience; and the first crime is Cain's murder of his brother Abel.

Does Jacob fear that he is about to re-enact something that is primordial and awful, such as brother killing brother? What can he do? He can't not struggle: struggling was his nature, given even before birth. Is Jacob trapped in a Way of hopeless, unceasing struggle?

I don't think that we are that far away from Jacob. Although I have yet to visit a Guernsey house and find a pet camel, and although in terms of material wealth we are quite different to Jacob, nonetheless our island community is fragile. It is as important for us and for our civilisation as it was for Jacob, not to be consumed and taken over by our struggles. Perhaps it is to avoid that, that in the story—or our story, in many ways—Jacob, the man who has always struggled, sends everyone and everything ahead of him while he holds back.

And what is the result? In the laconic words of Scripture, 'Jacob was left alone'. He has pushed off struggle; and he now finds himself alone. We find ourselves in the 32nd chapter of the book of Genesis, and it is the only time that anyone has been described as being alone since the first man. God made Adam in the garden. And God saw that it was not good that Adam was alone. Adam was alone, and he was

surrounded by every creature that exists; all those flocks and herds and camels, and much more. But still it was not good, and then came Eve, Adam's wife. And for perhaps a brief time it was good, but then came disobedience, and then fratricide, and from it the whole long history of the human race, which is the history of struggle, which is the story of Jacob the man of struggle, who now holds back and is alone.

Is there some other Way? There most assuredly is! God has intervened to give us another way of being human. In mystery, the Scriptures show us this other Way in what happened to Jacob that night. A man came to him, and Jacob being Jacob, he wrestled with him all night long; and Jacob being Jacob did not fail to prevail. But then, something new. Jacob, the victor, refuses to let go. Prevailing is not enough. He wants a new Way. He demands a blessing.

The blessing is marked, as is often the custom, by a new name. Jacob becomes 'Israel', a word that means something about God ('El') and something about striving ('isra'). Jacob is told, you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed. But there is more here than comes to the ear, because Jacob has not merely struggled and prevailed. He has gone further. He has been wounded in the hollow of his hip. Jacob meets the dawn with a blessing and a limp.

As it turns out, the ensuing encounter of Jacob with his brother is peaceful and brotherly; they will not subsequently live together, but they will live without strife. But how does it turn out for us? For we too are in this picture. We are strugglers, we humans; strife is given to us in our birth. Yet we also receive from Jacob that possibility of going beyond our strife, and of living in a new Way with a limp.

All of this is a kind of picture of what God has done for us in Jesus, decisively and forever. Our Lord shows us a new Way, a Way that takes up our loneliness and our struggle, but goes beyond them, with peace and beauty and creativity. There is still

loneliness and struggle, but there is also something else, a new factor at play. It's a wonderful and very exciting Way along which we follow Christ. Yet part of the wonder is that we 'limp'. The Way of Jesus is (and I don't need to tell you) is also the Way of the Cross. When we embrace our Lord, we necessarily embrace his wounds. But don't be put off by that. Jacob had a most surprisingly good reconciliation with his brother. And with Christ, it only gets better. Our struggles will diminish and ultimately cease.

Amen.