

Ninth Sunday after Trinity | 2 August 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist

Genesis 32 verses 22-31

There is no denying the challenge that comes from reading Genesis chapter 32. 'Mysterious', 'ambiguous', 'puzzling' are just some of the words used by those who have attempted to understand it! Yet in the readings set for us over a three-year cycle it appears twice. Its duplication in the lectionary indicates its importance to the Christian tradition. Today it appears as Sunday by Sunday we travel with the great stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs of Israel. Today it's the last of four readings following the story of Jacob.

Today's story is one of transformation. The night-time wrestling match is a pivotal moment as the narrative moves from hatred and threat to reconciliation.

Jacob is the ultimate trickster. He deceives his father Isaac and his brother by claiming Esau's birthright and blessing. We are told that Esau hated Jacob as a result, and we overhear Esau say to himself 'I will kill my brother Jacob'. We can hear the echoes of Cain and his brother Abel in the background.

The result was a 22-year absence from home during which Jacob was married, had children, and grew a substantial fortune in livestock. He determines to go back to Canaan and is tormented with fear and terror at the prospect of an encounter with Esau.

As he crosses the river Jordon on the way home to Canaan, Jacob throws himself onto the mercy of God, to a God he barely knows, in the longest prayer in Genesis. And the trickster is still at work. Jacob divides his wealth into two and sends off a decoy just in case. The day before he is scheduled to meet Esau, Jacob sends a servant with a total of 580 goats, sheep, donkeys, cows and camels - in our language at best a sweetener, or at worst a calculated bribe!

His nearest and dearest and all his remaining possessions are sent across the ford of the Jabbok River. There Jacob is – stripped of all he owns – alone, vulnerable and away from those he loved.

We mustn't underestimate the terror of that night as out of the night's darkness comes an unrecognisable man. The stubbornness of Jacob is still there – he simply will not submit to the stranger. Is it Esau come to get him; is it Esau's guardian angel; is it an angel trying to bring Jacob to faith and punish his deceit; is it a river demon living by the Jabbok whom Jacob had disturbed? Jacob meets his match. He forced a blessing from Isaac but cannot do so with the night-time wrestler. Jacob is undergoing a transformation from seeing himself as command and control at the centre to someone else at the centre of things.

And that someone is God. 'You have striven with God', he's told, and receives what he did not request – he is given a new name and new destiny. He is Israel, literally 'the one who wrestles with God'. Jacob stands at the origin of God's covenant people whose destiny is to be the people who wrestle with God, who carry God's blessing into the world, whom God will never let go and who neither will let God go. Jacob becomes a metaphor or a picture of the people of Israel throughout their history.

Jacob's transformation is from deceit and fear to being the recipient of sheer unexpected and undeserved grace. He knows he has escaped with his life. And in the man whom he holds onto tenaciously he sees God. In the terror of the night 'I have seen God face to face', he says. Like Abraham, like Moses, Isaiah, Amos and Micah after him he has encountered the living God in a way that the tradition gives to only a few. Peniel stands as the evidence – 'the face of God' inscribed in a place. As does Jacob's limp as he moves away from the scene: the paradox of a stranger that cannot set himself free from Jacob's grip but can injure Jacob's thigh socket at will. God is mysteriously present in humanity, marked in Jacob's disability.

Some have seen in Jacob's night-time wrestling a deep psychological and personal encounter with himself. They have seen the mystery stranger as a symbol of Jacob confronting himself, going through the journey of inward turmoil, onwards to maturity and wholeness. Understanding the psychology helps to explain the power of the story, but it does not do justice to the physicality of the place name, Jacob's limp or even Jacob's change of name to Israel.

Jacob's transformation in his understanding of God from the one who colludes with manipulation, to the one who gives graciously and unexpectedly and Jacob's change of self-perception as now the founder of a covenant nation – both happen swiftly over these few chapters but to reduce the narrative to inward psychological experience loses much.

We remind ourselves of what happens next. Esau is on his way to an encounter with his brother, accompanied by an army of four hundred. All Jacob's fears are realised – but no – there is an embrace, kissing and weeping as the two brothers come together. The late Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi who died six years ago, wrote a book with the title *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. At its heart is the story of Jacob and Esau. Sacks points out that Jacob wanted to be like his elder brother Esau – he grasped his brothers heel in the womb, he took away Esau's birthright and the blessing for the future. This was sibling rivalry – the source and cause of enmity, hatred and the threat of violence and death - now reversed and turned into forgiveness, love, respect and mutual accommodation, breaking the cycle of revenge and retribution.

At the core of the Jacob narrative is the theme of hearts transformed, and reconciliation brought about through the surprising intervention of God's grace. For the nations of the middle east, for nations across the globe, and for us all, this is an invitation to reflect on the way that our desire to be like others, to have what others have been given, to see each other as rivals for possession of the same limited good – all this contributes to the continuing of war and the cycle of revenge.

We are encouraged by Sacks to reflect on the uniqueness of each nation and each person's calling. God has given each of us a new name, identity, destiny and way of flourishing. The acceptance of this within ourselves, the overcoming of our desire to hold onto those we see as rivals and prevent them from flourishing and growing into their own identity - this is the beginning of the path to peace not least of all because to see others as our rivals prevents our own flourishing before God and is a barrier to forgiveness and reconciliation. This acceptance, this overcoming does not happen instantly but is our wrestling with God.

As I conclude, I cannot take away or rationalise the strangeness and ambiguity of the night wrestling by the River Jabbok. But each of us can engage with the story on its own terms and experience like Jacob the surprising gift of God's grace and blessing.

Someone who did this was Charles Wesley, brother of John and perhaps the greatest hymn writer the English church has known – certainly the most prolific. In 1742 Charles Wesley wrote a hymn responding to Jacob's wrestling with God. In it the holding on by Jacob to the wrestler becomes

the Christian's holding on to God's salvation in the crucified one. It's got fourteen verses, but I'll quote just the first three:

Come, O thou traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay
And wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell thee who I am,
My misery or sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name;
Look on thy hands and read it there!
But who, I ask thee, who art thou?
Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

In vain thou strugglest to get free;
I never will unloose my hold.
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

What we have is Charles Wesley engaging with Jacob's experience by seeing in the wrestling his own conversion experience to Christ. The ambiguity of the story allows Charles Wesley to express his emotions as he looks to the crucified one as his saviour. He never will 'unloose' his hold on the one who is God in human form.

It is said that John Wesley, two weeks after his brother Charles died, was preaching and came to read the poem. So powerful and emotional were the first lines – 'My company before is gone, and I am left alone with thee' – that John Wesley was not able to continue speaking and many of the congregation wept with him.

God wrestling with Jacob might be one of the most puzzling and mysterious pieces of scripture that we read regularly in this Cathedral but it's also one that we find ourselves invited to enter into and experience.

What Charles Wesley sees clearly is that Christ is the one who breaks the cycle of revenge and enables forgiveness, that this is the deep theme of transformation that Jacob undergoes as he wrestles with none other than God himself with whom he comes to see face to face. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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