

19 July 2020
Genesis 28:10-19a
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I don't know when you last played Snakes and Ladders. I've been with some children not so long ago, and we've found ourselves playing the game. And I have to tell you, I don't like playing Snakes and Ladders! It involves no skill whatsoever, and the random chance of the dice can have one descending a snake back to square one when one is tantalisingly close to winning! It seems completely unfair that one's success or failure in the game has nothing to do with one's effort or skill; it has nothing to do with seniority, or position within the group. It has nothing to do with whether one plays nicely or aggressively. The winning of the game turns on the luck of the dice, and has nothing to do with whether or not one deserves to win.

The game originated in India,¹ and originally conveyed traditional Hindu philosophy contrasting destiny and desire. It came to be interpreted and used as a tool for teaching the effects of good deeds versus bad. The ladders represented virtues such as generosity, faith, and humility, while the snakes represented vices such as lust, anger, murder, and theft. The morality lesson of the game was that a person can attain salvation through doing good, whereas by doing evil one will inherit rebirth to lower forms of life. The number of ladders was less than the number of snakes as a reminder that a path of good is much more difficult to tread than a path of sins.

When the game was brought to England in the 1890s, the Indian virtues and vices were replaced by English ones in hopes of better reflecting Victorian doctrines of morality. Squares of Fulfillment, Grace and Success were accessible by ladders of Thrift, Penitence and Industry and snakes of Indulgence, Disobedience and Indolence caused one to end up in Illness, Disgrace and Poverty.

It was, of course, the appearance of a ladder in our Old Testament reading today that brought the game of snakes and ladders to mind.

¹ Following is a slightly modified excerpt from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes_and_Ladders viewed 16 January 2015.

Jacob, having used unfair tactics to obtain the inheritance rightfully due his older brother Esau, and having tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau as firstborn, is now on the run from Esau and on his way to his uncle Laban to find himself a wife. In Genesis 28:11 we read that on the way he “had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

In the dream God speaks to Jacob and blesses him, promising Jacob that he will bring him back to this land in peace and prosperity.

Now this should set our unfairness antennae on high alert. Jacob has thoroughly camped himself on the head of a snake on a square labelled Deceit, and we should see him plummet down the game board to a square labelled Shunned or Distrusted. But no; God blesses him, and makes lavish promises. It appears that this square labelled Deceit is accompanied by a ladder heading to Success and Fame. It doesn't seem right, really.

But all of us know, through experience, that the real world is not as black and white as what is implied in the causes and consequences of the Snakes and Ladders board.

This can really stick in our craw. We get upset when it seems wrongdoers get ahead while we who do right seem not to do so well. And we get upset when those who have wronged us don't suffer the consequences we think they deserve and when those we love and admire don't enjoy the blessings we think they've earned.

When we're in that mindset, we quite like Jesus' depiction of judgement in Matthew 13:

“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

But, actually, it is not just when we are upset about the apparent unfairness of life that we need this kind of picture. Because, if we think about it, we must recognise that the whole world, the whole of creation, is seriously out of order. We see injustice, violence, oppression, evil all over the place. And if we believe that God is just and really cares, really loves the creation he made, then we need to believe that God will act at last to sort it all out. And that must mean that God will act to confront and defeat those who give their lives and energies to wickedness, who profit from it, who lure others into it.

But if we believe that God is perfect in holiness and goodness, then it can't just be the big evils that are addressed: it must include all wrongs, no matter how small.

So we want all this sorted out, A S A P! Get those weeds ripped out; get them on the fire now!

Well, not quite.

Well, not at all, really!

Because we have to recognise that each of us is implicated. "Whoever has ears, let them hear." Each of us has the weedy stuff of evil and wrongdoing in our lives. They may be little weeds relatively speaking, but they're there nonetheless, and they need addressing because in them we fall short of the perfection God has made us for.

So recognising this, we are grateful for God's forbearance. The weeds and the wheat are allowed to grow to their full extent before the Son of God comes to exercise God's perfect, wise judgement.

And the good news is that we who have accepted Christ's lordship already have the verdict "not guilty" recorded against our names. We are not to be consigned personally to destruction; but the wrong within us will be ultimately put to death for good.

The key point is that the task of separating the weeds from the wheat is for Christ alone. When we look at others, we must not – we *cannot* – judge, because there is a mixture of weeds and wheat within each of us.

And the strange thing is that even though, like Jacob, we're mixtures of good and bad, God still chooses to use us for his purpose in the world.

Jacob's ladder was a vision of heaven and earth in communion, angelic messengers ascending and descending between the realm of God's dwelling and the location of human life.

The imagery of Jacob's ladder was later to be picked up by Jesus himself. In John 1 we read of how Philip is called by Jesus to follow him, and how he immediately goes to Nathanael and declares that he has found the one spoken of by Moses, the long awaited end-time prophet. As the conversation goes on, Nathanael announces that Jesus is the king of Israel, the Messiah. In response to these bold affirmations, Jesus says to them, 'Very truly I tell you, you will see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on" the Son of Man.' Here Jesus applies the image of Jacob's ladder as a metaphor to describe who he is.

Genesis records that Jacob named the place at which he had his dream "Bethel", which means "God's house". Years later Bethel came to be one of the great sanctuaries of Israel, one of the places where early Israelite worship was carried on. The tradition of Jacob's dream, of angels going up and down on the ladder, was connected with the belief that when you worshipped God in his house, God was really present, with his angels coming and going to link heaven and earth.

Jesus has taken this ancient story, and now applies it to himself.

A great deal of John's gospel has to do with the way in which Jesus fulfils the promises made concerning the Temple, and how he goes beyond these promises, pioneering the new way in which the living God will be present with his people.

In Jesus we have the new Bethel, the perfected Temple, the meeting place between heaven and earth. Jesus, who is human and divine, is in a sense like a ladder joining the two realms.

And because his work on the cross has delivered the verdict of “not guilty” for those who claim him as Lord, we find heaven opened to us.

Listen to the extraordinary language with which Jesus ends the explanation of his parable:

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. “Shining like the sun” is an image of glory and magnificence. And this glory is for those found righteous through the work of Christ, the Messiah.

Listen to the extraordinary language Paul uses:

... we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Wow! Here we are, mixtures of wheat and weeds, but by the grace of God and through the work of Messiah Jesus we get to share in the divine glory, shining like the sun in the kingdom of God the Father. We who dwell at the bottom of the ladder suddenly find ourselves elevated to its top! Much as I dislike Snakes and Ladders, the fact that I cannot by my own skill and effort determine whether I win the game or not is a good metaphor for the fact that I don't *deserve* God's favour, just as Jacob didn't. Having a place in glory is all the result of God's grace.

But let us always remember that this is not for ourselves alone. From the beginning, God's purpose was that humankind act as his ladder between heaven and earth. As I've said before, the language of “kings and priests” was used to denote the function humankind was meant to have, being the intermediary between Creator and the rest of the created order. God's plan “called for human beings to take their place under God and over the world [isn't that a great ladder picture?], worshipping the creator and exercising glorious stewardship over the world.”² And we who have been put right with God through Jesus Christ are sent once more into creation to do that “ladderly” bridging work, for, as Paul puts it, the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God [that us, Paul says] to be revealed. It is eagerly waiting

² Wright, *Romans*, p.152

because it is looking forward to its own liberation from bondage to decay which will be brought about through the freedom and glory enjoyed by the children of God.

The biblical picture of the end of the age is the joining of heaven and earth, when God's reign will be all in all. Our "ladderly" work – our work for justice and peace, our work for the flourishing of human beings and of all creation, our work in sharing the good news of Jesus' kingly reign – is work towards that end, and in anticipation of it.

Of course, for now, we have our own groaning because that future still lies ahead of us. In the meantime, we still have to cope with the weeds – our own, and those in others. But we can cope, and indeed we have work to do, because of this future into which we have been called.

Last week we read of how Jacob manipulated Esau into obtaining the inheritance that was Esau's by right. And then Jacob was to discover that what he and his descendants were to inherit was actually by gift from God – the promised land. We have an inheritance, for we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We have obtained this, not by deception, nor by our deserving, but by the grace of God. We are therefore in God's debt.

"We are debtors to the God who loved us, who has saved us, and who is leading us home to the land we have been promised, the eventual new creation. Inheriting that, we shall for ever be in God's debt, and should recognise that already and live accordingly. Debtors, after all, are under an obligation. Some Christians speak and live as if everything simply comes to us from God while we sit still and merely receive it. But God's gift and call to us are not for ourselves alone, but for the purpose of working through us to bring about the transformation of the world. ... We have to live in a particular way, a way which anticipates the 'glory', the rule over creation, which we will eventually share with the Messiah."³

³ Wright, *Romans*, 147-148

Sources

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