

2 August 2020
Genesis 32:22-31
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

There is a tantalising postscript to the mysterious story of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32. The chapter ends with this statement:

Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. (v.32)

And I find myself wondering about that tradition. As the centuries passed might we have found some Israelite families gradually lost the tradition altogether, eating every part of the haunch without thought? Might we have found some other families who still held the prohibition strongly but with nothing more than a sense of "we do this because it is our tradition, as part of what makes us distinctive"? Might we have found other families who could still connect their action with the strange story of Jacob's struggle? And would we have found any Israelites for whom the tradition expressed and symbolised something that was still real and genuine about the ways of God and about the relationship between God and his people?

This little postscript challenges me. The tradition memorialised a particular event, a direct experience of God. It is possible that the tradition might help later generations experience God; but the Israelites would have had to be careful to ensure that the tradition didn't come to replace the direct experience of God. The risk is that we can end up majoring on the traditions, on the rites and symbols, and along the way lose the reality to which they point.

This Thursday is the Feast of the Transfiguration (see Matthew 17:1-8). The transfiguration of Jesus is a great example of something of the risk I describe. When Jesus was transformed and revealed in glory alongside Moses and Elijah in front of his wondering disciples, Peter's first instinct was to erect booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter tries to extend the wondrous moment, and to link it to one of the great festivals. But his instinct towards memorialising the event, fossilising the moment, is a distraction from what it is really about – that Jesus' glorification lies

ahead on another mountain, in humiliation, in darkness, flanked by two outlaws, and that this other mountaintop experience is the way for our own glorification too. Rather than erecting booths and hanging onto the moment, Peter needed to follow Jesus down the mountain and get on the way with him to Jerusalem and the cross.

We too can often major on the rites, the symbols, and lose sight of the need to live the reality to which they point. We don't ritualise the Feeding of the Five Thousand. But the event does have strong overtones of the Last Supper, in which Jesus was also to take bread, give thanks, break it, and give it to those assembled. Without wishing to take anything away from the miracle of multiplication Jesus performed in order to supply the 5000, it has often been pointed out that there is a strong sense in which communion, communion with God and with one another, *sharing* with one another as equals, is an important theme here as well. Matthew notes that "All ate, and were satisfied." It is certainly one of the important layers of meaning in the Eucharist, which we also call Holy Communion.

But we have a problem if we simply spiritualise Holy Communion, and forget to pay attention to the reality that is symbolised in it – for example, the reality that part of our life as followers of Christ is sharing what we have as equals. That is what Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 11 when he wrote:

So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. (1 Cor 11:27-29)

What had been happening was that people were conducting the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, in a way that actually divided what was meant to be *one* community, the body of Christ, into haves and have-nots.

But I digress.

The point is, the things we value enough to symbolise are meant to be *lived*. So, what ought to be lived out of Jacob's experience of wrestling with God?

Here is Jacob, twenty years after his vision of God and of angels ascending and descending on a ladder. Here he is on his way back to the land of his birth, now married to Leah and Rachael, with children, and an abundance of wealth. But he is afraid, because to go back means he must encounter Esau, the elder brother he had twice deceived – taking his birthright (his inheritance as firstborn) and taking Isaac's fatherly blessing. Who knows how Esau feels about all this now? Has he been nursing this grievance all this time? Is he out for some form of revenge?

Before today's passage begins, we find that Jacob has taken steps to protect himself. He has divided his family, servants and flocks into two camps in the hope that if Esau attacks one, the other might escape and be saved. Then as our reading opens, he separates himself off with the Jabbok River between him and all that is his, and he spends the night there alone. And during the night, this mysterious encounter occurs.

The text is sparse and cryptic, saying simply that "a man wrestled with Jacob until the break of dawn."

The time just before daybreak is significant: this in-between time is often a time of transformation.

The passage doesn't directly reveal the identity of the man wrestling with Jacob. Commentators have come up with various ideas: some suggesting that this wrestling man is Jacob's greatest fear and rival – that Esau has come to him disguised in the night; some suggesting that the wrestling is with Jacob's own inner demons. But Jacob goes on to identify the stranger as none other than the Lord God himself. Nevertheless, it seems to me, that there is a truth to be found in holding all of these possibilities together at the same time. Sometimes we find that God is somehow at work as we wrestle with the things that beset us, the things that we fear, the things we have done wrong. Think of it this way: when we wrestle with our conscience convicting us of guilt, are we not in a sense wrestling with God?

Jacob's is an epic struggle. It is also very intimate – wrestling involves entangled limbs, torsos pressed up against each other, holding on, sweat and spit and blood

mingled. But it must come to an end before the sun comes up, because otherwise Jacob will see God's face and die.

Three things result from the encounter.

The first to notice is that Jacob now finds the capacity to face his brother and to make peace with him. Jacob names the place Peniel, meaning "the face of God", and when the next day he makes peace with Esau he says to him, "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God". Jacob is transformed and able to be reconciled. Never again does Jacob engage in unprovoked conflict with anyone.

The second result is that God both blesses Jacob *and* hurts him, dislocating his hip so that when the sun comes up he ends up limping away from the encounter. This is a reminder that the process of transformation in God will not be comfortable and easy. The course of discipleship – following Jesus – and the course of sanctification – becoming more and more like Jesus – are not meant to be easy. We need change, but we're often quite comfortable with how things are so when we have to change we hurt.

The feeding of the 5000 also has strong imagery of the Exodus, when the children of Israel were fed in the desert with manna and quail from heaven – given all they needed, in abundance. And this reminds me that the forty years spent wandering in the wilderness, with all its hardship, was the process of the *formation* of this people into the people of God. God's people always need to undergo the difficult, uncomfortable, work of being formed in the ways of God.

I would like then to think that whenever the Israelites prepared meat and cut away the tendon connecting muscle and hip that they would be prompted to reflect on how, like Jacob, they were in need of God's transformative work, and recommit themselves to that painful process.

The other result of Jacob's encounter is that he gets a new name from God. Jacob becomes Israel. Jacob had carried a name meaning "deceiver" or "usurper" or "cheat". All of his life up until that point it seems, Jacob had put his energy into

obtaining what rightfully belonged to others. At heart Jacob is a scoundrel. And we may expect that deep down Jacob knew that was the case. So when, locked in the tight and painful embrace of wrestling, God asks Jacob's name, he is effectively asking him to confess.

And then God gives him a new name. He calls him Israel, the one who has wrestled with God and prevailed. The new name reflects the transformation of character that has occurred.

And I think this too is a powerful and important truth for us all.

You see, we are each called by so many "names". Some of them are affirming and good; but many of them are not. Many of our names originate in our childhood and formative years. "Teacher's pet", "Fat", "Slow", "Useless at sport", "Too quiet", "Weak" ... for example. You will, I have no doubt, have your own examples.

We get trapped by the names and labels others put upon us. We get trapped by what we call ourselves, by our self-labelling. We get bound up by the names given us by Satan, the accuser, the Father of Lies. Unwittingly we allow these labels to have power over us. We tell our stories about ourselves, and about others (which amount to names, to labels, to stereotypes) ... and we make no allowance for change, for growth, for transformation.

But through the work of Jesus the Messiah we, like Jacob, are set free from all this. In Jesus we are given a new identity. And it is the only identity that really matters, the only identity that counts in the long run: *we are beloved children of God*.

Recall the words from Romans 8 we heard a couple of weeks ago:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "*Abba, Father.*" The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—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.

Each week we need to come before God, confessing the names we have taken on ourselves, confessing the names others have suggested which we have allowed to take root within us, confessing the names we have put on others.

Each week we need to hear again that the work Jesus did on the cross, the work which is announced in the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup of Communion, has won victory over the power of all such names and has allowed us to become identified simply as adopted children of the Most High God.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

(1 John 3:1-2)

*I will change your name,
you shall no longer be called
Wounded, Outcast, Lonely, or Afraid.*

*I will change your name,
your new name shall be
Confidence, Joyfulness, Overcoming One,
Faithfulness, Friend of God,
One who seeks my Face.¹*

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