

Sermon

Sunday 2 August, 2020

Lesson

Genesis 32: 22 – 31

*‘And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two womenservants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had. And Jacob was left alone.’*

In the dark, stillness of night Jacob was alone. The Jabbok, a tributary of the river Jordan, flowed nearby. With only the distant stars for company and light, Jacob was ‘blind’, unable to penetrate the encroaching blackness all around. In this dramatic and most memorable story, Jacob wrestled with ‘a man’ until the breaking of day.

Wrestle is a good word. It does not mean that Jacob and the man sat in peaceful meditation for hours or that together they reclined and relaxed, talking amusingly all night. Wrestle means to grapple, struggle, fight and force your opponent to the ground. It took the whole of Jacob’s strength to tackle the man, everything he had: every skill, tactic and muscle. Whatever the outcome was going to be, Jacob would never forget that night; it would-be a life-changing event. He would greet the sunrise exhausted. In the story, the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was touched, barely touched, by the man and,

after the ordeal was over, Jacob left that place limping; the limp being a metaphor of that struggle.

Was it a dream that Jacob had, an inner wrestling, a dark night of the soul? Who was the man? Often it is when we are truly alone that we are most aware of our vulnerability and failings; it is then that our inner demons crawl out from the mind's cave. Was the man a ghost from Jacob's past come to haunt him? Or, was the so-called man in the story an encounter with God, an inner vision? Later, Jacob named the place Peniel meaning 'the face of God'. Jacob said, 'I have seen the face of God'. Elusive, surely, and beyond the capacity of human eyes to see, of the human mind to comprehend yet, in some sense, Jacob 'saw' the Eternal. The story is heart-stopping.

Across the canvas of our lives, there will be scenes of inner struggle, episodes of doubt or failure, times when we have feared being alone and, I hope, times also when we have felt the closeness of God, the warmth of God's breathing. In her life, St Mother Teresa spoke of the dryness and emptiness of her spiritual life; on many occasions and for extended periods, this tiny and tender saint of the Church told of her 'night' struggles with God's continual absence.

Few people 'see' God or 'hear' the voice of God. The verbs 'see' and 'hear' are not to be understood literally; rather, we are to perceive or discern God in our lives. God is the Infinite in and through all that

is finite; elusive, imperceptible, yet present and comforting. The night struggle of Jacob may begin as a frightening story but, in the end, Jacob is blessed by God. Is it possible that the barely touched thigh, that strangest of details, suggests that it was only when Jacob accepted his own brokenness that, with the inner eye, he saw the face of God? No longer invincible, his self-importance dethroned, his desire for the world's glory debunked, Jacob matured into a more spiritual, beautiful human being.

Our encounter with God is often in our most private times, our periods of aloneness. On many occasions, Jesus sought the seclusion and solitude of the mountain. The distinguished Methodist minister, Leslie Weatherhead, wrote movingly of God as a Friend.

Weatherhead said:

I have come home from some meetings thoroughly tired and disappointed and disillusioned. I have settled down in an armchair with bitterness in my veins instead of blood. There was a desire to write a letter calculated to crush one's opponent, and phrases which would silence him thronged on to the threshold of my mind. I was too tired to pray, too tired to stir up any desire to pray, and then I tried an experiment. I relaxed the body and relaxed the mind, left, as it were, the door of the mind ajar. There was very little more than a vague longing for the coming of the Friend, that Friend who understands, who understands our worst moments without losing belief in our best. And then something happened. The peace which is indescribable flooded the whole spirit; a hush which is ineffable quieted the mind. I have never seen a vision, I have never heard a voice, but I have felt that the last thing

I wanted to do was write the letter, and the last words I wanted to use were those which would have brought the pride of an opponent down to the dust.

From the stories of Jacob and Weatherhead, to your story and mine; from thousands of years to this very day, God is encountered as a Friend, an Intimate like no other - a Lover to be welcomed not feared.

Amen.