

Wrestling with God

A few weeks ago, our Old Testament reading introduced us to Esau and Jacob. The twins born to Isaac and Rebecca. Jacob was the second born of twins. He came into this world grasping his brother's heel. His parents named him Jacob, which means "grabber". It seems that through his life, Jacob would always be trying to get ahead by grabbing at any opportunity ... often by means that may not have been all that honest.

But his brother Esau was the tough one: he spent his time outdoors and hunting. By contrast, Jacob was a quiet boy, and we learned that their natures divided their parents, too - "Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob." (Gen 25:28).

And then, "Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (25:29-30)

Jacob grasped the opportunity – Jacob answered, "First sell me your birthright." (25:31)

Sure enough, Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew.

Genesis chapter 27 tells us that when Isaac was old and blind, he was ready to give his blessing to Esau, but Jacob conspired with his mother to take the blessing in his brother's place. Disguised by his mother, wearing his brother's clothes, and with goatskin covering his smooth skin, Jacob presented his father with some goatmeat in place of the game that Esau brother had been sent to hunt,

Sure enough, Jacob received Isaac's blessing "May God give you heaven's dew and earth's richness — an abundance of grain and new wine.

²⁹ May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." (Gen 27:28-29)

We read that '...Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."' (27:41)

Jacob fled. He fled to the land of Harran, where he stayed with Rebecca's brother, Laban.

Whilst there, it was Jacob's turn to be tricked – he ended up working for Laban for years and married to Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel. And then he had children by Leah, Rachel's servant Bilhah, Leah's servant Zilpah, and finally by Rachel.

After tricking his father-in-law into building up his own flocks and sheep and goats, and with tensions increasing between himself, Laban and Laban's sons, and Rachel having stolen her father's household goods, Jacob and his family fled.

So, after 20 years Jacob went home. Back to the father he had cheated and lied to. Back to the brother who had threatened to kill him.

He prepared to meet his brother... he even had a peace offering ready – "two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys." (32:14-15)

A generous gift, perhaps. But would it be enough to make up for what Jacob had done? Would it be enough in the face of the oath that Esau had sworn against him?

And then Jacob learned that Esau was coming to meet him – and bringing with him a force of 400 men. It didn't sound like it was going to be a joyous family reunion.

Which brings us to this very strange story we have in today's reading.

Jacob sent his family across the river – perhaps to protect them, perhaps just to have some time alone to prepare himself for the confrontation with his brother – and Jacob was left alone for the night. While he was alone, and until daybreak, a mysterious stranger appeared and started to fight with him. He would have had no idea who it was – perhaps a robber, perhaps someone sent by Esau to kill him, perhaps even Esau himself. The fight, the wrestling match, just starts... but by morning, Jacob will say that the man he wrestled with was God himself.

This was a long fight – with neither of them gaining the upper hand. Apparently evenly matched. Perhaps it was in the dark, or perhaps by lamp-light. If this really was God, how could it be that Jacob was a match for him for so long? If God is really so big, so strong and so mighty (as the Sunday School song says), how could it be that he couldn't instantly triumph over Jacob?

It could be that Jacob was mistaken when he identified the man as God, and the Jewish tradition is to believe that the man was an angel of God, rather than God himself – because they can't accept that Jacob could prevail over God. We see that reflected in the book of Hosea (12:2-4), where we read "The Lord [...] will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds [...] as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favour."

Or it could be that God was wrestling with Jacob as a father might wrestle with a child – holding back so he wouldn't hurt the child.

But whatever the explanation, the fight went on, and they wrestled until dawn. And then the stranger touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. (32:25) which you would think would have been the decisive blow, but instead the stranger asks Jacob to let him go, because it was morning. (32:26)

The strangeness continues, because Jacob says, "I won't let you go, unless you bless me."

God earlier made Jacob a series of promises much like those that he made earlier with Abraham— including the promise, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring." (Genesis 28:14). However, Jacob wants the blessing, not just for 'all peoples on earth', but also for himself.

And in response to the request for his blessing, the stranger simply asks Jacob what his name is.

"Jacob."

"You are no longer called Jacob. You are Israel. You have struggled with God and people and have prevailed."

Sure enough, Jacob's whole life had been a struggle – from wrestling his brother in his mother's womb, to struggling to be born first, to stealing his brother's inheritance and his father's blessing, to struggling with Laban for his wife... Okay, "Israel" it is.

"So what's your name?" he asks the man.

Jacob didn't get an answer to his question. What he got was a new name, a perhaps even a new identity through this stranger who Jacob who he identifies as God. Now he is called "Israel" which

can mean “God preserves” or “God protects”. In his new name, a new people had been formed, what would be the nation of Israel. Jacob, now known as Israel, was the one who had faced God, struggled with God, been gripped by God, given a blessing, and renamed. Jacob was forever changed.

When the new day broke, the stranger who is God had gone. But so, in a way, had Jacob. Now, only Israel remained, walking with a limp. That morning, Jacob the man who was always so sure of himself, who would cheat, scheme, lie and deceive to get ahead, had become a changed man.

Jacob realised that he had been spared through God’s graciousness; because, of course, he knew God could have defeated him at any time. Throughout his life, Jacob had struggled for everything he had – his birthright, his inheritance, his father’s blessing, his family and his wealth. It seems he was always looking forward to his next goal – or perhaps the next ‘mark’ he could trick out of something. But in this encounter, he realised that some things were beyond his ability to talk – or trick – his way out of.

God had come to him in human form, he’d come down to Jacob’s level and engaged in this strange wrestle – this wrestle that God could have won at any moment.

But in the end, God blessed him! No one had seen the face of God, but Jacob got to wrestle with him! It’s no wonder he says in amazement, “...I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (32:30).

I think this encounter shows us that, whatever our past, whatever our previous priorities, God never gives up on us. In Jesus, God came down to our level again – once and for all – he became part of our world, and knew the joys and struggles of human life. In the end, though, instead of wounding us, he took our wounds on himself – and died in our place.

Remember the mocking of the crowds of Jesus on the cross “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” – rather than save himself, he saved us.

We are saved... but life remains a struggle. A wrestle with ourselves, a wrestle with the world, a wrestle with each other, and a wrestle with God.

There are times when we wrestle with our own failings – the times we are disappointed in the way we have responded and acted, the things that we’ve done wrong, the things that we failed to do. We constantly have to make choices, and often our choices are wrong. Often, because of the nature of the world and the situations we find ourselves in, we’re forced to choose the lesser of two evils.

There are times when we have to wrestle with all the calamities, dangers, tragedies and injustices that life in this world brings. We wrestle with questions like ‘why does God let this happen?’ and ‘What have I done to deserved this?’

We look for answers, but so often the answers aren’t clear – or our questions aren’t even answerable. They’re questions that people have struggled with – wrestled with – since long before Jacob wrestled with God. But they are questions we continue to wrestle with.

People have tried to answer these questions – theologians, philosophers, mystics, everyone it seems, at some time. Some of the answers are great and theologically sound and widely accepted, but often they crumble away in the face of our own experiences and circumstances.

We can have a nice answer to the question ‘Why does God allow suffering in the world’ – but when the suffering is ours, or the suffering is some we love’s, then the answer can seem hollow.

Sometimes, it seems, God uses tragedies and disasters in our lives to lead us to trusting that everything is in his loving hands and nothing can cause him to love us any less. I heard it put nicely as ‘Sometimes God saves us from the storm, sometimes God saves us through the storm’.

But that’s a hard thing to accept when we’re going through storms of our lives.

Jacob wrestled with God, and we do to – albeit metaphorically. And like Jacob, we will come away from that wrestling changed by God.

Because, like Jacob, in our wrestling we encounter God’s power, and experience his strength. God is big and strong and mighty – and yet he doesn’t strike us down, and we so experience not just his strength, but also his mercy and his love.

And through our struggles, like Jacob, we are made new with God, we might not get a new name, but we are refreshed in our relationship with God, and reminded of the blessing of God.

Up until this point in his life, up until this wrestling match, Jacob had been trying to go it alone – trying to live by his wits. But God came him, and God didn’t simply overwhelm him and take control of his life, but instead God engaged with him. God wants us to engage with him too – probably not in a physical wrestling match, but in a figurative one. The more we live, the more we know about life – and also, I think, the more that puzzles us about life. There are always more questions to ponder.

Jacob didn’t emerge from his encounter unaffected. He didn’t walk away from his encounter, instead he limped. But he was a changed person.

The story of Jacob wrestling with God is ultimately a story about grace, of God engaging with someone, and changing him through it, but not in the way we would expect. Rather than an instantaneous revelation, it was a struggle.

And our faith is strengthened when we have to struggle. There will be times when God confronts us and challenges us. Times when we will all wrestle with God. Times that we will be changed.

But always, through every struggle and all the times of our lives, God’s blessing for us.

Amen.