

Pentecost 19C, Sunday, October 20th, 2019

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 119:97-104, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8

Introduction

The scene that we have just witnessed in the film "The Name of the Rose", is all about interpretation. On the most basic level, it is a murder mystery where William of Baskerville, a Franciscan intellectual is set upon the task of solving some murders in the Benedictine Abbey, in northern Italy. His Benedictine colleagues, resident in the Abbey, have deep suspicions about his reliance upon reason to solve the murders. He is seen as a tad too self-sufficient, arrogant, perhaps a modernist. At a deeper level, we also witness the conflict over the place of reason in religion, in Christian theology and faith. At a time in the late Middle Ages of 14th century Europe, where reason was beginning to 'find its feet', those who held to tradition, especially religious tradition, were struggling. In the clip we see just that: William and Jorge of Burgos, rub up against each other, about the question of laughter and whether Christ laughed, and behind that whether laughter is legitimate. William focuses upon reason, broadly understood to argue the case, while Jorge relies more exclusively upon Biblical tradition, each arriving at opposite interpretations, antagonistic conclusions. Each interprets words in different ways, each interprets the tradition and the Bible differently, and each struggles, limps a little: William as he argues from first principles, and Jorge as he reasons from his 'knowledge' of the Bible.

The Hebrew Bible: Jacob Wrestling with God

With this in mind, let us turn to the intriguing reading of the Hebrew Bible: the challenging story of Jacob and the Angel. Any accurate reading of Jacob, must include his history, how the Bible sees him. Jacob was no paragon of virtue. Deep-seated family hostilities characterized Jacob's entire life. Because his parents, Isaac and Rebekkah played favourites, he and his fraternal twin Esau grew up hating each other. Jacob also swindled Esau of his family birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance. Later, he and his mother Rebekkah lied and connived to swindle the family blessing from his blind and dying father. When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban in Haran, the very place from which, his grandfather Abraham, had originally departed years before, on his initial journey of faith. But it did not end there, sick of his uncle's and father-in-law's manipulations, for Laban was both, Jacob fled Laban, only to end up facing his hated brother Esau again, on the other side of the River Jabbok - a tributary of the Jordan. Seeking to bribe Esau, Jacob sent a train of gifts across the river, along with his women and children. In despair and fear of how Esau might respond, Jacob fell asleep, too spent to struggle any longer. But then, the real struggle begins. That long, lonesome night an angelic stranger visits Jacob. They wrestle throughout the night until daybreak, at which point the stranger cripples Jacob with a blow to his hip that disables him with a limp for the rest of his life. In the process, Jacob the Deceiver, for that is the meaning of his name, "Jacob," receives a new name, Israel, which likely means "He struggles with God".

The point of this theological story, the insight is this: that God while with us, will not always be the one we hope for, or want God to be. While God is our benefactor, God may equally be our adversary. In the end, as people of faith, we all limp in matters of faith. Even our very perceptions of God, are informed by, tilted to our own perceived interests.

The Significance of God as the One with Whom We Struggle

There is then something utterly mysterious about God, utterly inscrutable, utterly unknowable, which means that Christian doctrine needs to be handled carefully, with humility. Neither the Bible, nor Christian faith, nor Christian theology are merely text-books, to be read at face value. All are more complex, nuanced and subtle, than what we are often prepared to concede.

In this regard, I refer to the recent turn of events with regard to the complex and contentious issue of same-sex marriage. Most recently, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Glenn Davies, was reported to have demanded at the Sydney Anglican Diocesan Synod that those who disagree with the church's doctrine on marriage, leave. In his own defence a day later, Dr Davies, clarified that he was not referring to church members as such – gay or otherwise – but to those bishops in the Anglican communion who wish to change the doctrine about marriage. Even so, Dr Davies went beyond his authority when making this statement, to other bishops. Usually, even when bishops have contrary views, they remain prudent in what they say; they are keenly aware of their own limitations.

But perhaps more importantly – and this I think is critical in this current debate – all human statements, even those of a supremely high order that seek to express in faith God's saving truths, are finite, they inevitably limp a little. In other words, even our most profound doctrine and dogma, never declare the whole of a reality, they are only ever partial. Like Jacob, we all struggle with God. We all limp, whether we are gay or heterosexual, whether we proclaim the uniqueness of marriage as between a man and a woman, or whether we are less persuaded. We all limp, whether we are archbishops, bishops, clergy or laity. What ultimately binds us – and this is what Dr Davies forgot – is not our oneness of view, for Christians have historically speaking agreed on few things. What binds us is our baptism in Christ. It is our baptism in Christ that makes us one: end of story!