

Jacob – Struggler who finds peace

Genesis 32 v 22-32

“Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.” These are the words of St Augustine, from his book - Confessions. Except for the Apostles and other New Testament authors, no believer has affected the shape of our Christian faith more than Bishop Augustine of Hippo who lived (354-430 ad).

In the same book, he wrote, “Alas for me! Through your own merciful dealings with me, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul, I am your salvation. Say it so that I can hear it. My heart is listening, Lord; open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, I am your salvation. Let me run towards this voice and seize hold of you. Do not hide your face from me: let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed.”

Augustine was a restless soul, until he found his peace in Christ.

Today we are focusing on Abraham's grandson Jacob, who was also a restless soul.

Our story finds Jacob heading for home. He was going home after many years away, but what he was really searching for was his true home, in God's arms.

Jacob, like Augustine was a restless soul, always struggling...always searching for something else, whether it be birthrights or his Father's blessing.

Even before he was born, we are told that he was restless; for in Rebecca's womb the two babies jostled each other – Rebecca asked why, and she was told, because two nations are in your womb and two people from within you will be separated, one people will be stronger than the other and the older will serve the younger. 26v23.

Jacob came out of the womb of his mother grasping his brother's heel. This was to set the scene for the rest of his life. This was why he was called Jacob – one who grasps or one who deceives. So, not a promising start for this baby boy.

Jacob was the blue-eyed boy of his mother Rebecca whilst his brother Esau was the blue-eyed boy of his father Isaac. Esau was a hunter in the hills and Jacob was a home lover; they were as different, as chalk from cheese.

From the beginning of his life, Jacob was a deceiver. Esau was the first born and so Jacob saw the opportunity to steal his brother's birthright for a pot of stew. What was the birthright? It was the right to become the spiritual leader of the clan, of the tribe. It was a family position and now Jacob had it.

When his Father Isaac was getting old, again the deceiver Jacob sprang into action, as he stole his brother's blessing. The blessing that Isaac had reserved for Esau, was given to Jacob through deception.

Rebecca, the ever-interfering mother connived behind the scenes with Jacob, to trick her husband Isaac, and so Jacob has stolen both the birthright and his Father's blessing from Esau. He had taken from Esau everything that was legally his.

Esau appears to be a man with a short temper. He was furious and vowed to kill his brother. Rebecca again hatched a plan and sent Jacob away to live with her brother Laban under the pretext of finding a wife from his family. She convinced her dying husband Isaac, that this was the proper thing to do. Jacob headed away and it's whilst on the run that his first big encounter with the living God of Israel happened.

On his journey to his uncle Laban, in a place called Bethel, as the sun set, he lay down to sleep with a stone as his pillow, and he had a dream. In the dream he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven, and on the ladder he saw the Lord who promised him that the land that he was lying on would be his and that he would be blessed with children and his family would become as numerous as the dust of the earth, and all nations would be blessed through Jacob and that the Almighty God would be with him each at every step. He saw angels coming up and down the ladder.

Jacob continued his journey and he met Rachel and fell in love with her.

He made his home with his uncle Laban, another deceiver, who tricked Jacob into fourteen years of hard labour to gain his daughter's hand in marriage, which Jacob dutifully did.

But after fourteen years, and maybe several more, Jacob had had enough of his uncle's deception and he reacted and left secretly with his two wives, who were Laban's daughters – Rachael and Leah, and all the property that

he had gathered and his family. It took Laban three days to catch up with him. They sorted out their differences and then Jacob was free to go, but as he had run from the wrath of his brother Esau fourteen years earlier, so he returned to the place where he left. He found himself in a place of panic and turmoil as he realised that he had unfinished business with his twin brother, who was heading towards him with 400 soldiers.

This is where our story is located today.

Jacob, the struggler, the deceiver, has come face to face with his own struggles and in the wilderness again he wrestles and fights within himself. He spends a whole night in struggle. A sleepless night as he wrestles with his inner demons and seeks to find ways to make peace with his brother Esau. But his struggle is also spiritual, for his struggle is with God and submitting to God's will for his life.

The God that appeared to him in a dream when he fled from Esau has now appeared in a wrestling match as he makes his way home to Esau.

Then after the all night struggle, we are told that the "The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel and he was limping because of his hip" 32 v31, like a wounded soldier returning from war. So Jacob gets up from the ground after his fierce contest with this stranger and walks into the sunrise. A new beginning, a new day, has dawned in his life.

This was his moment alone with God, his AHA moment, his conversion, his new beginning, his new start. God gives him a new name and also a weakened hip, a memory of the struggle.

What were his struggles?

Was he an insecure person?

Who, What, was Jacob wrestling with?

Was it the fear of meeting his brother?

Was it guilt? Did his past catch up with him?

Was it doubt? – a midlife crisis? As he made his way home.

Was it grief? His mother had perhaps passed, she is not mentioned any more.

Was it pride? As he comes home with his cap in hand to his brother?

You name it and it was probably there.

There is no false piety in this story? We see a man who has been crushed by the hand of God. A man on his knees, broken, with all his human faults and weaknesses. Here is an individual – much like ourselves – open to God and open to wrestle with the power of God. Here is a man struggling to come to terms with the complexity of life – a man who finds himself in no man's land between a rock and a hard place.

Fifteen plus years earlier, we would have met with a different man, a more brash and confident individual:

- when he left his home to escape the wrath of his brother Esau with his brother's birthright and his brother's blessing, stolen from under Esau's nose
- on his way to live with his uncle Laban, encountering angels and a ladder to heaven and the Lord himself calling out to him and promising him great things
- again meeting with God, on the same road but this time a contest, a wrestling match, in the darkness of night

It is a great story for all who struggle in the journey of life.

What aspects of your life do you find yourself wrestling with?

Jacob sent his eleven sons, two wives and his livestock across the ford of the Jabbok and all his possessions that he had accumulated over many years. He was then all alone – no human comforts – nothing except him and his maker and his night of wrestling began.

So this confident young man who left home now returns, a man with much painful life experience, as he limps into the arms of his brother Esau who does not hold a grudge against him, but rather embraces Jacob as his long lost brother.

What do we learn from Jacob's life?

1. **God's ways are not our ways.** Humanly speaking we would have given up on Jacob. We would have seen through his deception and we would have discarded him as a worthless case. A cheat, a deceiver, tricking his own family.
Could we have seen Jacob changing from Jacob to Israel, from Struggler to Prince?

I doubt it. But God could.

As we heard last week, God had a plan to create a great nation from the line of Abraham, and Jacob is very much part of the plan. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham, that great man of faith, and God was going to continue his plan.

I think it teaches us also that God sees further than we do. God wasn't just interested in the present, he was preparing for the future. He was creating a nation.

As I look back in my family tree, I see that my great uncle was a Free Church minister. I'm sure he and his godly wife prayed for future generations, that somewhere down the family line God would bring other family members to faith.

Who are we praying for today? Are we praying for future generations...our grandchildren...?

So it's encouraging for us to hold on to this truth, that God is in this with us. We might well despair as we look around our Western world and see the church that we grew up in getting smaller. As the world becomes more secular and material, the spiritual seems to be of less value. Can God have a plan and can He bring life to those dead bones? Well, he did to Jacob. God can raise up new life, even out of something that looks pretty hopeless.

2. **It teaches us that God takes raw material and creates something that is pleasing to him.** There is nobody beyond the reach of God's grace. This is a theme right through the Bible from beginning to end – Jacob, Paul, David and Peter - God takes a block of marble and creates a masterpiece.

He takes a despicable, violent slave trader like John Newton and turns him into a man of amazing grace who becomes a preacher of the Gospel and who has left us a legacy of hymns like *Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me*.

God is at work in us. If we allow him.

Sometimes he has to meet us alone and wrestle with us until we say with Jacob, *"Lord bless us."* So, don't despair, no matter how challenging it might be, God continues to wrestle with us and create something beautiful – soon we will be entering Spring. A few months to go yet, but we know that it's on its way as Spring struggles to appear through the grip of Winter. And at this time of year we are encouraged by the humble snowdrop, as it struggles through the cold of Winter to make its appearance. Be encouraged by the butterfly, as it struggles out of its chrysalis and enters a new world of freedom.

Who would have thought that the humble caterpillar would become something so beautiful? A caterpillar destroys plants with strong jaws and chews leaves, while a butterfly only drinks nectar through its proboscis, promoting plant growth by pollinating flowers. What a transformation and nature abounds with illustrations that speaks of the purposes of God as he transforms Creation, so he transforms human nature.

3. **It teaches us that an encounter with God is possible.** Encounters with God happen throughout the Bible, each and every character makes an extraordinary encounter with the Living God:
- Abram called to leave home
 - Jacob who wrestles with God
 - David who meets God in the hills and the valleys and overcomes Giants
 - Moses who meets God at a burning bush

and the list goes on, leading up to Jesus who encountered the presence of God in his baptism and all through his life, usually alone in the hills, and then Paul, who encountered God whilst on his way to persecute followers of Christ - so Saul the murderer became Paul the man of grace.

The God of the encounter is active today. We may wonder how the church is going to go forward and in what way. It's important to remember that the Church is about God and he has everything in control. His Son Jesus is the head of the church and he still calls men and women into an encounter with himself. He sees the Jacobs and

the Davids and the Pauls and he sees what they can be in his hands. So let us trust God, that encounters with him are still happening, and lives are still being changed through these encounters.

4. **It teaches us that an encounter with God is not a one-off encounter but it leaves a permanent mark on us forever.** Jacob limps away from the scene of his encounter. He is never the same again, he has now to limp through life, he has a physical reminder of God's hand upon his life. The Jews to this very day will not eat meat from the hip bone. Jacob has left a reminder of the cost of an encounter with God.

Each morning when Jacob got up and the sun rose upon him, he would remember this encounter and in remembering he would seek to be close to God and he would remember that God changed his name from Jacob to Israel.

What about us, what mark has God made upon our lives? What difference has he made and is making to us? What in our lives causes us think about God? A time that we have been through – an encounter – a challenge – a place where we met with God and he spoke into our lives? Never forget those moments for they are precious.

I would rather limp into Heaven than be turned away at its gates because I couldn't be bothered to meet with God on my earthly pilgrimage.

Can I encourage you today to wrestle with God in prayer – to make opportunities to struggle with him – to question, to doubt, to be angry, to laugh. God is with us in all our emotions in life. He wants to be part of our life, and when we meet with God in this way, in doing so, we come to know him in a deeper way.

Go forward today like Jacob and embrace our loving God, for he wants to be embraced.

Amen