

WRESTLING WITH GOD

August 3rd, 2008

In the midst of this mid-summer long weekend, we gather together today to worship, greet our friends and celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In the exuberance of summer with its enjoyable weather, special civic events and festivals across the County, we stop for an hour to worship our God in thanksgiving and praise.

As a congregation, we welcome the opportunity to return to regular worship here and to welcome our friends and neighbours from across this wonderful area. By the absence of many congregants, we are reminded that many are away on holidays and we hold these friends dearly in our thoughts and prayers in our time of worship together.

Today we have two very interesting assigned biblical readings. Let us reflect on them together.

The first is from the Old Testament Book of Genesis, which means the beginning. We are re-introduced to Jacob, one of the two sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Let us go back and start the story from the twin's birth. These two boys were very different, Esau being large and physically strong and Jacob being slighter and much smaller. Esau was the oldest son as he had been born first though he was Jacob's twin.

When they were older, Jacob had tricked Esau out of his birthright and through deceit, had obtained their father Isaac's blessing as his heir.

Jacob had to run for his life and had gone to another land to live with relatives of his mother Rebekah. There he had been well received and indeed married the head clansman's two daughters Leah and Rachel. These two wives produced 12 sons, each of whom founded one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

We pick up this story in our reading today. Jacob, richly blessed and wealthy, has decided to go back to his old home and face his brother Esau, hoping for reconciliation and forgiveness.

On the way to see his brother, Jacob was having a very restless night, tossing and turning as his head was full of what had happened in the past and what may happen in the future. Suddenly, Jacob was aware of a man's presence and began to struggle with him. They wrestled all night. At daybreak, the man let it be known that he must stop the struggle and leave for it was daybreak. No, retorted Jacob, I will not let you go until you give me your blessing.

There are many ideas abounding as to what the significance of this struggle was and is. Jacob had prayed for God's protection against Esau's possible anger. Jacob was very well aware that he did not deserve God's protection after the ill way he had cheated his brother. Nevertheless, he prayed to God for protection and a good outcome to his meeting with Esau.

Tradition has it that the man in the dark was not Esau in a surprise attack nor was it some spirit of darkness. Rather, Jacob was struggling with God, the God of righteousness. In a sense the Old Testament was dramatizing here the consequence that comes to every soul that has tried too long to evade the truth about itself.

Here was Jacob outwardly very successful through the use of his wits. He had been very clever and was rewarded with riches, wives and sons. However, Jacob's conscience was another matter. He saw his world shadowed by the guilt he carried. His decision to go back home had raised again all the guilt and the hard memories that he had tried to bury all these years. Now he had to face these memories; he had to face Esau; he had to face other family members and associates who remembered Jacob as a liar and a cheat. Jacob could be very brave in the daytime but here, alone in his bed, he had to face the reality of who and what he was. Alone in the dark, he discovered he could not get away from God.

So Jacob wrestled all night. His wrestling opponent put Jacob's thigh out of joint to stop the struggle but Jacob persisted. This thigh out of joint was a symbol of the fact Jacob was in the grip of a power all his self assurance could not match. Jacob knew that henceforth he could never walk in lofty arrogance again.

Although Jacob had been a cheat and a liar, Jacob also had two good qualities. The first was his awareness that life has a divine meaning above its material fact. He believed there was a God. His second great quality was his determination. He struggled all night and would not give up until he had faced his past and had received some sense of forgiveness and acceptance from God. Jacob was not a shallow man who ignored his sins nor was he a coward hoping to evade the consequences of his actions. Jacob hung in there until he faced what he needed to face. When it was all over, though Jacob was exhausted and sore, he received the assurance he was looking for of God's forgiveness and love.

You and I, we too wrestle with ourselves. We also wrestle with God as we attempt to face who we are and dare to ask for forgiveness and God's blessing. Like Jacob, we want to be right with God. In order to do so, we need to be right with ourselves, not deceived by the picture of ourselves we prefer to paint. Wrestling with God, we come face to face with ourselves and we feel naked, ashamed and vulnerable.

The Jacob reading ends with God giving Jacob a new name. No longer would it be Jacob. Now, he would be known as Israel. It symbolized his being a new man, reborn in the image of God.

You remember the words in the Genesis passage: "Your name shall no more be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

When we wrestle with God, there is a blessing after this struggle.

Our second reading was of the well known story of Peter and his encounter with Jesus on a stormy night on the Sea of Galilee. You remember the details: Jesus was exhausted and withdrew to pray alone. The disciples moved offshore in their boat after Jesus had finished with the crowds and had departed from them. As so often happened on the Sea

of Galilee which is quite shallow, a storm blew up and the waves became ferocious. In terror the disciples huddled together praying they get through the storm without a shipwreck and the loss of their lives.

Suddenly, through the wind, waves and sea spray, they look in disbelief. There was Jesus walking calmly on the water towards them. It can not be, they shouted to one another. It must be a ghost which would be a bad omen for them all. Then they heard these wonderful words and knew it was Jesus: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."

Peter, ever the one to jump at opportunities and always impulsive in his actions, asked Jesus if he could join him on the water. Of course you can Peter; "Come!" Now Peter had a decision to make. He could stay in the safety of the boat with the others or he could get out of the boat and move towards Jesus. He instinctively knew that to walk on water, you first have to get out of the boat.

Is this not true in so much of what we do? To encounter Jesus, we have to move out of the safety zone where we are, step over the side of the boat, and begin to walk forward to Jesus. To Peter's surprise, his foot did not sink as he stepped out of the boat. As long as he looked straight to Jesus, sensing the warmth of his eyes and his outstretched arms, he was ok.

Then he glanced at the sea around him, the stormy waves and his friends huddled together in fear in the boat, He began to doubt what he was doing and began to sink.

In response to Peter's cry that Jesus save him from drowning, Jesus reached out and held him. "Why did you doubt me Peter?" Jesus asked. You were doing so well until you once again lost faith in me and experienced fear.

As Jacob had encountered the man in the dark, so Peter again recognized his inability to give himself completely in faith and trust to Jesus.

Do these two stories not ring true to us? We too want so badly to be close to God, to be worthy of his trust. Yet, we have trouble giving ourselves totally to him. We see so many stumbling blocks in the way, most of them within ourselves. How can we expect a blessing from God when we are so weak and inadequate?

Yet, both stories reaffirm what we have been told. The separation between us and God is not God's doing. Like Jesus to Peter, he holds out his hand to us and encourages us to step into new territory, new adventures, new ways of doing things. God is excited for us; we need to discover this excitement for ourselves in walking with God through our life.

Later in the service we will join together around the Lord's table as his guests. It is his table, not ours. To this table God has invited us as guests to come and celebrate what he has done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We venture forth in new ways because God is beside us always, even unto death itself and beyond.

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