

SERMON St James THE GREAT, SHIRLEY
Sunday 25th July 2021

Readings:

Genesis 32:22-32

Acts 11.27 – 12.2

Matthew 20.20-28

Ave atque vale

I'm conscious that this is a double farewell: in my case it's *ave atque vale* which I understand is Latin for hi and bye; for Kevin [Gill] it is the end of a long ministry here at St James's

I remember my training vicar gently saying to me, after I had preached my first sermon as a curate in 1987, "You know, God willing, you've got a long ministry ahead of you, and plenty of sermons to preach; so if I were you, don't try and say everything at once". I'm not sure I've always remembered his advice, but today I'll try not to detain you for too long. Not for your sakes you understand – it's just that I can't wait to see the new garden behind Church House!

Now to the matter at hand.

First of all, let me say how grateful I am to Paul for inviting me to preach this morning, and to all of you for the welcome Kate and I received when we arrived. It truly is a delight and a privilege to be among friends again.

Let us pray.

May the words that I speak, and all that you hear and experience today, be to the glory of God the creator, encourage you in the way of Jesus the son, and uphold you in the life of the Spirit. Amen.

Some of you will remember Matt Melough. When I arrived in 2013 Matt was the PCC treasurer and remained in that role for a while after I became incumbent, combining accountancy skills with a quite remarkable knowledge of potatoes! Matt is a Roman Catholic and had been educated by the Benedictines at Downside Abbey. So when he used to tease me occasionally about religion, he knew what he was doing! He once told me about his team being disqualified from an inter catholic school quiz when one of his team remarked that the old testament was just a collection of Jewish folk tales. It seems the monk who was chairing the proceedings wasn't impressed. I like to think that Matt was at least a little surprised when I replied that while I would dispute the word 'just', this is indeed true, though what I might have said and want to make clear today is

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that those folk tales (included in the so-called books of Moses), along with poetry (the psalms), lists of regulations (Leviticus), philosophical musings (Ecclesiastes) and political and social commentary (the prophetic books) seek to answer some very important questions in ways that refuse to give up on the belief that God is to be experienced in the midst of all that comes our way. And it is this that makes them holy and scripture.

In my experience, some questions simply won't go away; questions such as who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we belong? And I don't know about you, but the past year has brought these questions very much to mind; and not just because of retirement, though I have discovered that to move away from a community that has occupied almost every waking thought for nearly seven years takes some getting used to. But the experience of retirement pales against the anxiety, sorrow and isolation caused by the pandemic which has brought these questions into sharper focus than ever. We have experienced the dislocations involved in telephone and Zoom calls and face time, of conversations conducted between the front door and the garden gate, of not being able to embrace loved ones or shake hands with friends, or not being with those same friends and loved ones when they need us most; where it's difficult not to think of others as possible sources of infection. That these dislocations were and remain necessary I have no doubt, but knowing that somehow doesn't make it easier – if anything it makes it worse.

Reading the bible in a way that really helps us answer these questions isn't easy and as important as personal devotional reading of the scriptures should be to a Christian, reading them together is vital too, something that the past year has brought home sharply to many Christians.

For the avoidance of doubt, as a lawyer friend of mine is fond of saying, even the most careful reading of the bible rarely if ever gives us a clear, unambiguous answer to every question that arises. It won't, for example, tell you whether to wear a mask now that restrictions – for the time being at least – have been lifted. What it will do, however, what this morning's reading from Genesis will do, is present you with a story that embodies all the complexities of human experience and motivation and invite you to find the living God in all the messiness of human experience, in the separations and dislocations that can and do occur. And I

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suggest that by reading with our hearts and minds open, we can find encouragement to live fully and not be overcome by experience.

So let's look at it.

You would be forgiven for thinking that Jacob is a bit dodgy. What he is of course is human and as such he is neither irredeemably wicked, nor unfailingly virtuous. Like all of us he is a mixture of many things, shaped by circumstances and experience. Who we are is neither fixed, nor inevitable and nor are the outcomes of our actions. Jacob takes advantage of his brother Esau's hunger to trick him out of his birthright as the elder brother, and with the conniving of his mother tricks both his father and his brother in order, in a serious breach of family loyalty, to receive a blessing that according to ancient custom is not his. And to add insult to injury Jacob uses the first trick to justify the second! Of course, his actions have consequences and by the time we come to this passage he's experienced what it means to anger a powerful man and at times it's been touch and go. He's even offered gifts in the hope of cooling his brother's anger. And then despite his 'pragmatic' approach to matters of family loyalty, he finds himself taken into the mystery of God's presence. Which is a way of saying he is not defined by his own unscrupulousness and that of his mother, nor condemned always to repeat this behaviour. Jacob is opened up to new possibilities in a way that has momentous consequences for him and those around him. He is rescued from being reduced to or defined by his past, a possibility that is open to anyone. Such is the power of this encounter that he takes a new name with which to face life with new purpose and responsibility. It's as if he has, to coin a phrase, been born again: with the features and characteristics that make him recognisably Jacob to his family and friends, he is nevertheless someone new, Israel.

So who, or what, does Jacob encounter that makes this night so momentous? The answer is, we're not sure. We are told it is a man. But Jacob – or Israel as we must now call him – believes he has encountered God – and lived! This uncertainty invites us to recognise that we almost invariably express our experience of the mystery of God's presence in terms of what we think we know, what we claim to understand, what used to make sense to us; the miracle is that God refuses to let us be trapped by that past experience – there are always new opportunities to thrive.

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There is nothing passive about Jacob's encounter with God and nor should ours be. Jacob gives as good as he gets and while he is significantly affected, symbolised by the injury to his hip, this should not blind us to the fact that he is demanding something, something precious and powerful – a blessing. And in receiving it he is reminded of his own dishonesty while at the same time experiencing an acceptance beyond his wildest dreams.

This story tells us that holiness is up close and personal, unexpected, risky, and never ever to be taken lightly. Which I dare say is what Jesus is getting at in this morning's gospel reading. Notice how there is no reproach in his response to the mother's request. I don't know about you, but I'd have been with the mutterers.

"Who do they think they are?"

"Who does she think she is?"

But Jesus, as is so often the case, takes them – and us – beyond that, to another place – to the kingdom. He shows them and us, over and over by his teaching and example, to wish for something better, to become more authentic as human beings. And because it will take us on an arduous journey – forty years in the Sinai desert anyone? – it will not always be a comfortable experience. And in doing so he offers us the means, the grace to find answers to those important questions. We – and by 'we' I don't think Jesus meant only those who acknowledge his place in their lives – we are wonderful; often vulnerable, always fallible (sometimes downright wicked), but always wonderful;

Our origins reach out across the world, a fact that I always found one of the fascinating things about living in the west Midlands for all its challenges, false starts and misconceptions. Some even come from Up North.

We belong to one another, no matter where we came from, or where we end up living. This has been brought home in any number of ways in the past year, some in heartbreaking ways: connections we took for granted cruelly interrupted or broken by the pandemic, or in the case of many immigrants and their British born descendants, by poverty, prejudice and the cruelty of others. The pandemic has left me with a powerful awareness that we're all strangers really, strangers who tussle in many and varied ways with the living God who finds us at the heart of our experiences, good, bad or indifferent. And once we learn that to truly belong lies in encountering God, only then are we able to find ways through adversity that life giving and generous.

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That Jacob came from a tribal culture shouldn't blind us to the fact that wanting power over others is an all too familiar ambition; and the willingness of his mum to help him achieve this shouldn't surprise us: the prospect of power over others was and remains a dizzyingly seductive incentive to action. Which is why Jesus confronts the ambition of James and John and their mother head on, but in a way that refuses to assert power over them.

Jacob discovered that he couldn't avoid the consequences of his past actions, but his willingness to experience God in this startling way makes possible a radically different future;

In discovering what belonging to God means, Jacob became Israel, he became both the same person and yet a new creation. Blessed St James learned in the most powerful way what it means to walk in the ways of God in Christ Jesus.

Jacob had a night of solitude amid all his fears and machinations; James and John were helped to move beyond their dreams of glory; we have had all the uncertainties of a troubled and troubling world intruding sharply to call into question our most precious expectations and assumptions. And in the midst of all this we have been invited to learn that belonging is not about geography, it's about unconditional acceptance – of us and by us – in other words, we learn the meaning of love.

Standing here this morning, I have tried to resist the temptation to wax anecdotal. Yet I don't want to forget that the person I am now is a product of many experiences, including being privileged to work alongside you as your priest. There are many stories that could be told about the six and a half years or so I shared the adventure of faith with you. But the only story that really matters is how we discovered the glory of God revealed to us in Jesus in all that came our way, and then looked to share the experience that transformed us, as it did Jacob and the apostles, so that no one should worry about being worthy – none of us are; so that no one should even consider worthiness an issue worth considering; so that sharing the commitment to ensuring that Jesus can be all in all came to be nearer the heart of our life as a worshipping community.

Jacob says to the mysterious figure, "I will not leave until you bless me". God blessed me during my time here and for that I thank God – and each and every one of you. It may not appear so right now and for a while to come, but there is

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blessing to be found in renewed awareness that in the end nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus, to quote the apostle Paul.

May we all know God's blessing, whether that is in good times, or in the many difficulties that come our way. May we wrestle with angels in the darkest night and greet the morning with a renewed sense of wonder at the glory of life in God, knowing what it means to truly belong.

Amen.