



## Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

31<sup>st</sup> July 2011

*Genesis 32: 22-31, Psalm 17: 1-7, 16, Romans 9: 1-16, Matthew 14: 13-21*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

One of the simple ways we build awareness of the Divine presence is to be attentive to the auspicious moments that provide divine reference points in the every day. We all experience them; sometimes we let them go too easily, other times we write them off as coincidence. I returned to St Paul's from my leave on Monday morning, the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood and so to the beginning of my ministry here – very auspicious, I found it quite amazing. The other thing that I found amazing, and that amazed me while I was away because I was already looking forward, and that is the first reading that was given in the lectionary, for this my first Sunday back here, is the story of Jacob wrestling with God and being given a new name, Israel, because I found in every church, if not every place I visited while I was away, there was a wrestling going on.

In the text before that which we read today [v12] Jacob has heard, "I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude". Jacob knows the assurance of Divine blessing, that same blessing which Abraham knew, the eternal promise of fullness, abundance and the orientation to overcome fear. We might appreciate, it wasn't given to Abraham and it wasn't given to Jacob: we have those stories to illustrate that in every time and in every place and for everyone, that promise is a given. It is the Divine word, the call of creator and the call of creation into being; it is not an invitation to come to church. 'Children of promise' - it is an invitation to give yourself fully, truly knowing that it is in giving that we receive.

Jacob's fear, in the narrative we are reading, is in regard to reconciliation with his brother Esau. It is the same fear we all have, and it is the fear that limits our fullness and our wholeness, the fear of giving of ourselves, and of sharing ourselves with another, and with each and every other. We let ourselves off the hook when we do it to a partner, or to our children – be aware, that is still giving to oneself. The fear we have is the giving of ourselves that will bring about reconciliation for the all.

Today's narrative begins after Jacob has sent gifts on ahead of him to prepare Esau for the anticipated encounter – smart move, smooth out the path, make it a little bit easy; however, Verses 22 and 23, unknowingly for Jacob, the scene is prepared for another unexpected encounter. Jacob separates himself from his wives, his children, his servants and his possessions. He therefore encounters himself in his emptiness, (that place we are so fearful of finding ourselves). It is another delightful example of "it is in giving that we receive"; arguably, it is only in giving that we can fully engage the experience that which is narrated in today's reading.

In verse 24, left alone, Jacob encounters “a man [who] wrestled with him until the breaking of day”. It’s a wonderful image. It’s an interior encounter, for the distractions of the day are not there; this is not a scene in which we place Jacob and the man; all of the scenery has been removed. He’s alone, in himself, and so in that emptiness there is, as we discover when we pop in for the odd second, there is a darkness. But also in that same emptiness is the touch of the Divine. Verses 25 and 26 show us a surprisingly unorthodox balance in the encounter between man and God, between Humanity and Divinity. “*The (God)man did not prevail against Jacob*”, and yet his touch was wounding. And it is the figure of God who then seeks to leave - he seeks to leave, “*for the day is breaking*”. He’s not afraid of the light; God seeks to take leave as the unseen becomes seen. It is not that the power of God only prevails at night, or in the darkness, rather, it is only truly encountered when we have given away and find ourselves without the distractions and the temptations of the ‘seen’. Even more delightful, and what is illustrated here, is that if and when we encounter the Divine, if we are truly touched by God in our selfless emptiness, then that Divine power, in the light of Day is no longer seen as an *other*, for in our wrestling we too are wounded with, and *so carry, the very touch of God with us*. It’s quite a delightful movement and illustration of the process we’re called to engage in. That is what we have revealed in the person of Jesus: the Christ, the wounded representation of humanity, is also the manifestation of the Divine in the light of day.

This is such an important text; we should spend all week with us. It repeats for us the encounter in Eden - the wounding by the serpent that exposed the nakedness of Adam and Eve, exposed their emptiness, their unclothed being. And that wounding drove them into the creative enterprise of life, lived in the presence, and yet outside the direct influence of God, for they too carried the Divine with them.

Noah also embraced re-creation by aligning his life toward a giving, a hospitality towards the whole of creation. Abraham, like Jacob, followed the call to leave what he had, what he was, and to follow a different path that then gave birth to the end of Sarah’s barrenness. He is also willing to give his only son, for he too has faith in the unseen that is revealed to him. The narratives all overlap; in every age they illuminate the process that we hear again in the Genesis story.

In Jacob’s encounter the stone is rolled away; the unseen becomes visible, the day is breaking! In the emptiness of the tomb the power of resurrection becomes manifest: Jacob is birthed as Israel. He is, by his very being, a nation of God’s people; he becomes, or finds himself, as a created and creative part of the whole world. This is not history we are reading, it is not a documented narrative of times past. It is a story of now; these stories are invitations to us, for us to participate in life – but, in a life revealed more fully in Christ. It is a different way of living in a different world that is creative of a different tomorrow. As we leave the Genesis text, it’s finished with, [31] *‘The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.’* Penuel or Peniel can be translated as “the face of God”. So we are left with an image of the rising Son and the face of God, a fitting lead into the gospel.

The gospel begins with, *‘Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself’*. Jesus moved to the place of Jacob, a deserted place, alone. The place of encounter, the place of transformation and of seeing the unseen - that place is away from the busyness of the everyday. The gospel seeks to illuminate what the world would look like if we encountered the truth of Jacob’s encounter. It’s already revealed, so the Old Testament tells the truth that it’s all there in those stories. The New Testament doesn’t

change them; what we find in the New Testament and the Gospels is, 'You didn't get it did you? Look again. Here's another telling of it.' And one of the best illuminations we have of it is the life of Jesus, so those stories are told to help us more fully see: feet on the ground this is what it looks like.

For many in the church the 'Sunday School' story of the feeding of the 5000 is a miracle story - isn't it wonderful; it offers hope that Jesus will feed us. But that is not at all what the gospel narrative is about.... The disciples in v15 initiate the dialogue: *'When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place,[for it is the place of Jacob] and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.'* It's very clever because the disciples seem to mirror the compassion that Jesus shows in the previous verse. And then we come to the central text that sits in the middle of the dialogue; it's the key and crucial part in this gospel narrative: verse 16: *"you give them something to eat."* You give them something to eat. Here is revealed the truth and the whole point of this story, but what do the disciples respond with? In verse 17, *'They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."*

That is the Anglican cry, the response that has somehow become a part of our Christian understanding, *"We have nothing"*. And as is demonstrated in today's gospel, it is a lie. *"We have nothing"* is really saying, or hiding the fact that we **Give** nothing, or at best very little. Jacob, Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Isaac have all demonstrated that it is in giving that we receive. Here the disciples, like so many in the church today, say 'We have nothing'. Yet if we now follow the unfolding of the gospel story, we see that it is exactly, and *only*, what the disciples have that feeds the multitude. It's interesting, isn't it? Jesus doesn't produce anything, there's no magic in it; it's what the disciples have that feeds the multitudes.

One of the questions that came up for me in reading the readings for today was, are we, as the Church, complicit in holding each other back? Do we actually conspire to ensure that we never take that step that will make real what Christ has revealed? Is that what the church has become? We ensure that we will never take that step and walk into the light of day exposed, touched by God, and ready to give fully of who we are.

Jacob encountered the Face of God and found within himself the realisation of being Israel. The disciples, in the face of Christ discovered that it is what they have and who they are that feeds the multitude. We can - and this is our calling as Christians - find within ourselves the capacity to Give as Christ Gives: 'Greater things than these you will do'. Our calling is to feed the multitude, our calling is to work the miracles, our calling is to bring life. To give of ourselves in making real the abundance of God's promise, to live beyond the fears that are entombed in our world. Children of Promise – second reading – that's who we are. We have nothing, don't we? We have nothing - it's what the disciples said, so let's follow their path. Let's discover that it is us, us and no one else.

The Lord be with you.  
Peter Humphris