

## 03 Aug 2014 Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 32: 22-31; Psalm 17:1-7,16; Romans 9: 1-8; Matthew 14:13-21

### Proper 13A / Ordinary 18A / Pentecost +8 August 3, 2014

In the first reading we continue with the story of Jacob and today we read of another encounter between Jacob and God.

As we explore the story looking for insights and seeking to understand the story and its relevance to us it is helpful to be aware of the context of the story in relation to the overall story of Jacob. It is also helpful to contrast and compare today's encounter, with Jacob's previous encounter with God.

The setting for this encounter is significant, it takes place at "the ford of Jabbok"; the ford is a place of crossing over, and the stream is a place of separation.

Jacob has left behind Laban who he has served for some 14 years, he was initially deceived and now has out smarted Laban into giving him the best of his flocks. So Jacob has left behind his place of work, the place also where he found love, where he was married and lived securely. In many ways he has found freedom, no longer bound in service to Laban, his debts are all paid, and yet that same freedom has also brought insecurity.

In front of him, Jacob is approaching Esau, his twin, the brother who has vowed to kill him; so Jacob faces death, and perhaps here we will find a parallel with Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem [Luke 9:51].

Jacob faces death and yet seeks reconciliation, it is a place of real insecurity and yet also a place that offers true freedom.

Significantly, the encounter takes place at night, in the darkness, and that invites us to remember a previous encounter Jacob had with God; the dream at Bethel we read about two weeks ago.

Considering these two encounters we might question if it is the same God that Jacob encounters in both narratives.

At Bethel, Jacob encounters a God who resides in heaven and directs the life direction of Jacob through his messengers, the angels who ascend and descend via the ladder between heaven and earth. How different to the God Jacob encounters at the ford of Jabbok, A god, a man, who wrestles with him in the dark.

There is certainly something to be contemplated in comparing the two encounters from the Sunday readings.

However, in today's reading Jacob is transformed; from being Jacob he becomes Israel; today's encounter is a game changer and a name changer, and that's worth a closer look.

Within the narrative there is a process of transformation that is being described, and perhaps there is for us an insight into our own encounters with the Divine.

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Jacob is both in a place of darkness and also alone; he has, as it were, turned off the TV.

Jacob has had to create the place of being alone, it didn't just happen; and it is a different place from that which is usually described as 'lonely'.

He separates himself from his family; he finds the place where he is not a parent, nor a child, but an adult; and in the darkness of that place he wrestles.

In verse 26 we read; "*Then he [God] said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."*"; and in that moment, in that place of painful wrestling, Jacob has the power, a power that overcomes God.

And that moment of realisation is iconic of all that Christ reveals; God becomes man and at the same time man becomes God, humanity and divinity are there together and inseparable. Here Jacob finds the reality of our Divine genesis; 'made in the image of God' is not a dream, nor a promise, it is a reality that is to be found for ourselves.

Now we might consider what happens as a result of this encounter, this realisation.. The Genesis text encapsulates the future for Jacob in the renaming; "*You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel*".

However in the gospel, we have another example of what might occur having spent time alone and withdrawn into a deserted place, this time with Jesus as the focal point. There is a stunning parallel, for Jesus, fully human and fully divine, equates with the wrestling duo in the first reading; and his coming back into the crowd from a deserted place and from being alone, gives us the story of the feeding of the 5000.

As we saw in the first reading the wrestling match was a dynamic of power, and a discovery of power, a divine power made manifest in humanity. And that translates in the Gospel as an ability to give, and to create, and to feed, and to realise abundance...

In my thesaurus miracle brought up: wonder, phenomenon, marvel, sensation, vision and dream... However the gospel narrative is not a dream story – that would take us back to an earlier Jacob narrative and an earlier appreciation of God... This is a story of a post wrestling reality.

It is too easy to write off the story of the feeding of the 5000 as one of the miracles of Jesus, and all that achieves is to place supernatural powers into the hands of Jesus.....

Let's listen again to the details of the story:

*15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the*

*grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*

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The details bring to life this story in parallel to the Jacob story; “*the hour is now late*” tells us we are approaching the darkness, the place of wrestling between Jacob and God, and so we can now read the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples as a dialogue between the divine Word and the voice of humanity wrestling with reality.

Disempowered, the disciples see the need of the hungry and feel they can do nothing; “*send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.*”

Jesus wrestles with them; “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat.*”

As the wrestling continues, we find Jesus giving a blessing. Now recall the Jacob narrative; “*Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.*” Just like the disciples, Jacob asks for something and instead of what was asked for he receives a blessing in response.

And then we come to reality of the miracle: Jesus “*blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*’

That’s what we need to hear.... “*the disciples gave them to the crowds.*’

The disciples fed the 5000.....

In both stories today we see the outcome of wrestling with God, in the process of wrestling we discover “blessing”, and in the discovery of blessing we are opened to the reality of abundance.

From the abundance of God creation was birthed – that’s the opening chapter of Genesis, the first Word of the bible. The rest of the books in the bible seek to enlighten us so that we truly see ourselves in the image of God...

Abundance is our reality, and when we realise that we are blessed with divine abundance, we can perform miracles, we can feed the 5000....

Hunger in the world, hunger for food, for peace and for love is only a problem if we continue to live out of the scarcity of our humanity, as we wrestle to find our true selves, to find ourselves in God’s image, so we realise ourselves as the ones that can feed....

Jesus “*blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*’

Today we break bread together, we acknowledge blessing... and we receive into our hands the power to change the world by feeding the hungry.