

## **Evensong meditation 11<sup>th</sup> July 2010**

### **Genesis 32. 9-30**

This evening sees the culmination of the football world cup as it's the final this evening. I guess that there are many people who will be pleased that this day has finally arrived, either because it is the culmination of one of the greatest sporting events in the world, or because what seems to have been a month long nonstop game of football is finally coming to an end. I fall into the latter camp. Whilst not being completely anti football, my main grumble is that my beloved Coronation Street has frequently been displaced by the so called beautiful game. So after today my favourite soap is restored to its rightful place in the schedules. This disruption to my viewing led me to wonder what people did before TV soaps. I found my answer when I looked at the one of the readings for today: they read the Old Testament. Where else can you find tales of deception, sibling rivalry, the wedding night from hell, extreme weather, or relocation, relocation, relocation. If you sent in a script for a soap based on Genesis alone it would probably be sent back due to lack of plausibility.

Over the past few weeks following Trinity Sunday the Sunday lectionary readings have dipped into Genesis, so if you have been a loyal and regular Evensong attendee you will have heard about the lives of Noah, Abram, Isaac and Jacob. This evening we have heard the next instalment about Jacob. The phrase 'you couldn't make it up' certainly applies to his colourful life. Jacob is the twin, but younger brother of Esau. Genesis 25 tells us that they were fighting with each other in the womb. When they were born, Jacob emerged second, holding onto Esau's heel. His name, Jacob, means deceiver in Hebrew, and he certainly lived up to this. He took advantage of Esau's hunger to persuade him to sell him his birthright, then he deceived his frail and partially sighted father Isaac into thinking that he was Esau so that he could receive his blessing. Realising that it would be wise to make himself scarce after these deceptions, he fled to his Uncle Laban. Then he briefly had his come uppance. Having worked for Laban for 7 years in order to marry the love of his life, Laban's daughter Rachel, he discovers that he has spent his wedding night with unlovely Leah, Rachel's older sister. He has to work for another 7 years to secure a union with Rachel. Jacob became very wealthy, but we see an element of wealth not leading to complete happiness, because he is told by God to return to his homeland and make his peace with Esau. This is the point that this evening's reading picks up on. Jacob is preparing for this meeting. He has chosen gifts for Esau and has sent his wives and possessions ahead of him so that he spends the night alone. We're not told why he wants to be alone, but perhaps he wanted some space to reflect on the meeting with the brother whom he had treated so badly.

And then we come to this extraordinary event, where Jacob is involved in an all night wrestling match. At the end it becomes clear that his

opponent was not a man, but God. So the bad boy of Genesis has an encounter with God, he experiences the physical presence of God. And this is not the first time. In Genesis 28 there is the story we often call Jacob's ladder, where he has a dream in which God speaks to him directly.

I think that the story of this encounter between Jacob and God speaks to us today about our relationship with God. I'd like to suggest three ways that we can learn from this passage:

1. God chooses
2. God wrestles Jacob, not the other way round
3. Our relationship with God confers a new identity

**God chooses.** I described Jacob as the bad boy of Genesis. So why, might we ask, does God reveal himself to him? Surely there are others more deserving of God's notice? It feels a little like the mantra I encounter when dealing with young people who have emotional and behavioural difficulties.....why do we bother? There are several things we can say about this. First of all, God knows what he's doing and we have to trust him. As the Psalmist says: 'trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.' Second, isn't God's revelation to us all the more powerful because it is often through individuals with all our human failings and foibles.....just think about Peter, that wonderful, impulsive and oh so human apostle who denies Jesus but is ultimately his rock. And finally of course Jesus' own ministry is characterised by his presence with the vulnerable and marginalised. This should be reflected in our humility and trust in God. As a sign seen outside a church reads: 'this place is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.'

**God wrestles Jacob, not the other way round.** This follows on from the first point. Sometimes this account is given the title 'Jacob wrestles with God' but I would like to suggest the reverse: God started it. All his life, Jacob had been aware of the presence of God. Not long before this encounter we see him praying about the forthcoming encounter with his estranged brother. But here God is challenging Jacob, he's saying 'do you want a relationship with me badly enough to fight for it?' The account contains layers of symbolism that reflect Jacob's life: the wrestling match takes place in the dark and it was through the darkness of Isaac's poor sight that Jacob stole his father's blessing; the Hebrew words for Jabbock (the river that Jacob crossed), Jacob and wrestled are all similar sounding words. All this shows us a God who is far from passive, who desperately desires us to come to a relationship with him. In the Old Testament this longing of God is manifested in encounters such as Jacob's; we call these physical manifestations theophany. It is interesting that the individual with whom Jacob wrestles doesn't reveal his name to him even when Jacob asks him directly. We infer from the account that it was God

because of the name that Jacob gives to the location of the encounter: Peniel, which means the face of God. In the end Jacob didn't need to be told who it was, it was important that one of the outcomes of the encounter was that he worked it out for himself.

The light bulb joke for my professions runs thus: 'how many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?' The answer is 'one, but the light bulb has to want to change.' So God is doing all he can to gain our attention but we have to want to engage. Unlike Jacob, we have Jesus to show us the way to God and the means to come into a deep and meaningful relationship: Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.'

**Our relationship with God confers a new identity.** After the all night wrestling match, Jacob is asked for his name. What an odd question, if this was really God he was wrestling with then surely God knew who his opponent was. But this misses the point. What Jacob needed to do is to say his name, which if you remember, means deceiver. In order to move on, **he** had to say it. In the same way, when we accept Christ as saviour, we sometimes pray what's called the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This is a very ancient prayer, dating back probably to the fifth century and is a succinct summary of the gospel message and our status as needing God's mercy and grace. So when we pray this prayer we are admitting our faults to God. As a result of this admission and the acceptance of the grace of God freely given, we have a new identity. Jacob the deceiver became Israel which means God fights. St Paul says in the second letter to the Corinthians: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.'

So, to sum up. I deliberately chose to focus on the Old Testament reading for this meditation, not because I think that the reading from Mark's Gospel unworthy of our attention but because I feel that we often hear the familiar narratives from the Old Testament without giving them much thought. In the liturgy of this service we have sung of God that 'there is none other that fighteth for us'. The language of the battleground might seem outdated and irrelevant. In modern parlance we often talk about working at relationships. But I would suggest that God didn't **work at** a relationship with Jacob, he wrestled with him all night so that Jacob understood how much God cared. How much more, therefore, should we be open to God's call when we have the added benefit of his son to show us the way? But like the psychologist's light bulb, we have to want to change. Amen.

Dr Jane Yeomans