

Sermon preached by Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, Trinity 7, Evensong, St. Mary's Wimbledon.

What a larger than life character Jacob is but not an attractive personality. However God uses the least promising human material and transforms them by His Grace.

Jacob, had taken not only his twin-brother's birthright from him but cheated Esau out of Isaac's final deathbed blessing. A father's blessing was very significant and could not be retracted. What a betrayal. Jacob, has to flee to Haran as an exile to save his life.

Bernard Anderson, writer of "*The Living World of the Old Testament*", says Jacob's flight to Haran gives the narrator in Genesis a chance to introduce a cycle of legends that originally circulated independently - legends dealing with the entertaining adventures of Jacob in the territory of Laban.

Anderson suggests that the narrator has built this cycle into his literary architecture, suspending it "like a bridge supported from within by two pillars." Over on the one side, the bridge is secured to the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel (*Genesis 28, 10 to 19*), on the other it is anchored to the story of Jacob's wrestle with an assailant at the River Jabbock, part of our reading this evening, from *Gen.32:9-30*.

In the first story Yahweh meets Jacob in the time of his despair, appearing in a dream and renewing the threefold promises given to Abraham: to give to Israel the land; to make Israel a great numerous people; and through Israel to bestow blessings upon all the families of the earth, (*Gen.28:13-15*).

We can probably visualise William Blake's stunning picture of this amazing event. Jacob provides many artists with good material!

So Jacob journeys to Haran and we read of his many adventures as he works for his father-in-law to be Laban. We could say that Jacob gets his 'comeuppance' when Laban deceives Jacob and gets him to marry Leah the eldest daughter after working for him for seven years, rather than Rachel the younger daughter. However, Jacob then works another seven years and finally marries Rachel. We could say that Jacob had more than recompensed for his wrongdoing by his service to Laban. However along the way Jacob manages to make himself quite a wealthy man by his astute management of Laban's flocks.

So we come to the point where Jacob leaves Laban and departs with his wives and all his possessions, including his large flocks of goats, sheep and other animals, as he prepares to meet his brother Esau. We can imagine Jacob's trepidation at the thought of meeting Esau the brother whom he had cheated and who had threatened to kill him.

But God is there protecting Jacob once again and before he meets Esau he has two visions of angels. Firstly as Jacob leaves Laban we are told that the angels

of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's camp! So he called that place Mahanaim'. (*Gen. 32:1&2*)

As Jacob continues his journey he sends his flocks and cattle ahead of him and divides this huge contingent of animals and people into two companies. Jacob protecting his assets in case his brother Esau decides to destroy one company the other will still remain!

Jacob also sends his wives, maids and children ahead of him across the ford of Jabbok and with all his possessions.

Jacob turns to God acknowledging his own unworthiness. Jacob is left alone at night without any of his family or earthly possessions.

Bernard Anderson writes that we now come to the other main pillar of the narrator's bridge spanning the Jacob-Laban stories. Formerly, Yahweh had appeared to Jacob in a nocturnal dream in the time of his despair, now Yahweh comes in the form of the nocturnal visitor in a time of Jacob's prosperity, when it seemed that all he had to do was buy his way into the Promised land by winning Esau's favour.

Again we may be familiar with the Eugene Delacroix's picture of Jacob wrestling with an Angel.

David Cuzid in his commentary on Genesis suggests that this wonderful revelation of God's presence and care came after Jacob finally separated from Laban the worldly man. He suggests that separation from the world brings greater insight to the believer.

It certainly frees the mind and spirit to give up time to get for a Quiet Day or a Retreat when we do not have the cares and responsibilities and duties that we have every day. We can focus on God.

Jacob wrestled with the 'angel' all night to such an extent that his hip was put out of joint. Finally Jacob receives the angels blessing and realises that he has come face to face with God. So Jacob calls the place Peniel, "For I have seen the face of God and my life has been preserved." (*Gen. 32:32*).

As we know Jacob is reunited with his brother Esau and so gained access to the Promised land. To read more about that continue reading Genesis 33.

So what do we make of the story of Jacob a man who betrayed his brother Esau aided by his mother Rebecca; a man who was exiled and was himself deceived by his father-in-law and had to work 14 years to marry the woman he loved. A man who was worldly wise but had visions of angels and came face to face with God on more than one occasion. A man who repented of his sins and put his trust in

God and was reunited with the estranged brother Esau. A man who was crucial in God's plan for the world but seemed to be often working against God's plan.

We see a man who sunk to great depths but also a man who attained great heights by the grace of God and by his ultimate trust in God.

We see throughout the bible that God never gives up on human beings however far they stray from him. God transforms the most unlikely human beings by his grace. We may look at our own lives and feel we have wrestled with God like Jacob in his dream. It is often the times when struggle with our faith that it becomes stronger. We should never despair but put our trust in God. We like Jacob have to crossover to an unknown land walking in faith. The rewards will be great. Amen.