

ADDRESS FOR ST MARY WIMBLEDON – Sunday 16th October 2016 (Trinity 21 : Proper 24 Year C)

The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel has inspired many fine works of art. In trying to untangle such a complex story it's helpful to study how different artists down the centuries have interpreted it. If I lived in London I wouldn't have to rely so much on the internet, but could sometimes find a particular work of art close to hand.

(Thus I found myself at the Tate yesterday searching out Jacob Epstein's larger than life-size sculpture of Jacob wrestling with the Angel.....apart from its sheer mass, what struck me most about Epstein's interpretation was its primitive style, and his depiction of a hug rather than a fight. It's almost as though the angel was squeezing the life out of Jacob so tight is their embrace).

There are a number of paintings of the story too.....by Rembrandt, by the French artist Bonnat, who depicts much more of a wrestling match with lots of taut muscles; and in the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh, a strange but enchanting painting by Gauguin entitled "Vision of the Sermon". That shows a group of Breton women in devout poses, and in the background their vision of Jacob and the angel, having heard a sermon about the story. I doubt I'll inspire you to see visions, but I'll attempt to convey something of the striking contemporary relevance of the story for our relationship with God.

We needn't spend too much time on whether Jacob's fellow combatant was an angel or God himself. It seems clear enough that by the end of the fight Jacob was certain that he'd struggled with the almighty: "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved". A unique experience, for remember how even Moses on Sinai was denied a face to face encounter with God "for no one shall see me and live.....you shall see my back but my face shall not be seen". This is part of the aura of mystery that pervades this story.....and reminds us of God's transcendence as well as his immanence – his necessary distance and separation from us as mortals, yet also his proximity and closeness to us made known in Jesus.

Here the physical closeness of two people wrestling is meant to point us to a spiritual closeness, with a finely tuned balance between freedom and utter dependence. Any reticence we may have about the appropriateness of "having it out with God" should be removed by this story – which was probably significant in helping to develop a strong tradition of the place of argument and struggle in our relationship with God. We see this in many of the Psalms, such as in these verses from Psalm 44 :

"Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love".

Imagine those words on the lips of an orphan from Aleppo, and they assume a profound poignancy and yes, even legitimacy. Yet our struggle with God must ultimately be about empowerment rather than blame.

So let's turn to our own wrestling with God. You may want to think about those times when you've dared to express anger and other strong emotions in your prayers. Let me refer to two striking examples. In a conversation with Linde after church recently, she told me of how she poured out her sorrow following the sudden and untimely death of her husband, in an angry outburst of prayer. For Linde this was a necessary part of overcoming a difficult bereavement. Jack was exploring a vocation to ordained ministry. Others were telling him that this was his calling, but like so many before him, he resisted it and his conversations with God raised all the objections in a heated way. Rather like Moses again in responding to the challenge to lead the Israelites to freedom: "Why me? Please send someone else". God can cope with our anger, our resistance, and grants us the freedom to express ourselves openly, to argue the toss. Thus in our story Jacob is allowed to prevail in his fight with God and wrestle through the night until daybreak.

But then we have perhaps the strangest aspect of the story. Was it a clean fight? For when the angel felt he wasn't able to overcome Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket and his hip was put out of joint. Was this playing dirty? It almost sounds like it! Yet it does not deter Jacob who continues to persevere in his struggle and ultimately to win God's blessing, conveyed through the granting of a new name – Israel. True prayer is never easy or comfortable. If it is to change us, transform us for the better, then we will need resilience and perseverance. We may have more than our noses put out of joint! Jacob was given a permanent reminder of his struggle with God, rather like St Paul who tells of his "thorn in the flesh" writing to the Corinthians: "Therefore a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated". It's assumed that this was some form of permanent physical disability too; but what is most helpful in trying to understand the meaning of Jacob's story, is Paul's relating of God's answer to his appeal to be freed of this disability: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness".

What often interferes with our relationship with God, and renders our prayers less effective than they might be, is our pride. God is no control freak, as I hope Jacob's story makes clear. He values our freedom, but at the same time longs that we might attune our lives according to his will and purpose. Only thus can we find our true freedom, in submitting to the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

"The sun rose upon Jacob as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip".