

Homily, 19th Sunday after Pentecost, St Bart's, 19/10/25

(Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5; Luke 18:1-14)

I. Our Old Testament lesson today, from the Book of Genesis, narrates the rather strange story of Jacob wrestling all night with the angel. It's worth spending a few moments reflecting on that story this morning, particularly in light of our Gospel reading in which Jesus tells two parables. One is about the need to persist in prayer and the other is about self-awareness, which the tax collector (the sinner) has in abundance, knowing his own weakness and failings, whereas the Pharisee, the complacent and entitled religious leader, has none.

It's also relevant in the light of our epistle reading which speaks of the usefulness of inspired scripture to nurture and challenge us, to help us to grow. 2 Timothy is speaking of the Old Testament when it mentions Scripture, so it's even more appropriate that we focus on the Old Testament today.

II. In our story we find Jacob in a situation of crisis. He's about to meet his older brother Esau, many years after Jacob cheated him out of his inheritance: the first time they've met since Jacob ran away from home to escape his brother's fury.

Jacob by this stage is married to 2 sisters, Leah and Rachel, and has children of his own, as well as large possessions. When he comes to the Jabbok, he sends his wives and children and all his belongings across the river ahead of him, while he stays back to prepare himself for the dreaded meeting the following day. And now, when he's all alone, we're told that he spends the night wrestling with an angel, some kind of divine messenger. Jacob is determined to receive a blessing and won't let him go until he gets it. At daybreak he gains the blessing for which he has been striving. However, as a consequence, he is physically hurt by the encounter: the stranger touches the socket of his hip and damages him.

Jacob, in other words, is both blessed and wounded by the encounter and yet, though he now walks with a limp, he's somehow about to meet his brother the next day; and, despite his fears, they're reconciled to each other.

III. Aspects of the story are unclear to us: who is the stranger? Is he an angel or is it God himself? Why does he suddenly appear? And why is Jacob wounded by the encounter?

But the story provides a vivid metaphor of the times in our lives where we seem to wrestle with God. No matter how strong our faith is, there are times when we question what God is doing, when we doubt that God is interested in us and in our world, perhaps even doubt whether God exists. That's certainly true on the international front when we look at the wars and disease and violence and death that are so much part of our human story and the story of creation. Where is God in all of this? Where is God's peace and God's justice to be found?

Sometimes we may feel it about the church when we encounter narrow-mindedness and exclusiveness. Look at the negative responses we've heard to the election of Bp Sarah Mullaly as Archbishop of Canterbury. She's been criticised as a woman, she's been criticised for supporting same-sex blessings. We may well wonder where God is in all of this and why there's so much prejudice and inhospitality in the body of Christ.

The same may be true in our personal lives, particularly when we're going through times of difficulty. Sometimes God seems absent, sometimes we feel abandoned by God, sometimes think we're too sinful or shameful to deserve God's mercy. And sometimes we wonder if God even notices us or hears our prayers. In these times of questioning or wondering and doubting we are doing what Jacob did: we are in fact wrestling with God.

IV. Charles Wesley has a hymn that I've never heard sung in any church but is directly relevant to our story. Perhaps its because there are 14 verses and each verse has six lines, so it's a solid commitment for any parish let alone organist. It re-tells the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. The first verse begins:

*Come, O thou traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay
And wrestle till the break of day.*

The real question Jacob is asking the stranger is who are you? What's your name? What's your true nature? You know who I am, says Wesley, but you who are you? And that's really what the struggle is all about: the determination not to let God go, the thing Jesus commends in the first parable:

*'Tis all in vain to hold thy tongue,
Or touch the hollow of my thigh:
Though every sinew were unstrung,
Out of my arms thou shalt **not** fly;
Wrestling, I will **not** let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.*

In the end the poet gets his answer, and the answer is revealed in Jesus Christ, particularly in his death on the cross:

*'Tis love! 'tis love! thou diedst for me!
I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee:
Pure, universal love thou art;
To me, to all, thy passions move;
Thy nature and thy name is love.*

This is a profound and moving spirituality. We may well describe it as Methodist and it is of course typical of Methodist piety. But Charles himself remained a Church of England priest till the day he died. It belongs in both our traditions, and has resonances with other spiritual traditions too. It has a daring to it, a boldness. It's about coming face-to-face with God and demanding an answer.

So the struggle is worth pursuing. We can, we must, wrestle with God, as Jesus tells us in the parable, and find out for ourselves that God is love, pure universal love. And to live therefore out of that love for others, for all living creatures. Our love, like God's, is to reach out, especially where people are victims of poverty and injustice, violence and exclusion. We are to proclaim, in word and deed, that Christ's mercy for the world never fails.

V. The holy sacrament of the Eucharist is the central place for us to experience again the radical love of God for us and our world. Here we encounter God wounded: God given to us in Christ's broken body, in Christ's outpoured blood. Here, in this encounter, we receive the blessing of Jacob and the widow and the tax collector: the blessing that renews and sustains us in love in all our struggles.

Thanks be to God.

Mthr Dorothy

The Hymn (Charles Wesley)

1. Come, O thou traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay
And wrestle till the break of day.

2. I need not tell thee who I am,
My misery or sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name;
Look on thy hands and read it there!
But who, I ask thee, who art thou?
Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

3. In vain thou strugglest to get free;
I never will unloose my hold.
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

4. Wilt thou not yet to me reveal
Thy new, unutterable name?
Tell me, I still beseech thee, tell,
To know it now, resolved I am;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

5. 'Tis all in vain to hold thy tongue,
Or touch the hollow of my thigh:
Though every sinew were unstrung,
Out of my arms thou shalt not fly;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

6. What though my shrinking flesh complain,
And murmur to contend so long,
I rise superior to my pain;
When I am weak, then I am strong;
And when my all of strength shall fail,
I shall with the God-man prevail.

7. My strength is gone, my nature dies,
I sink beneath thy weighty hand,
Faint to revive, and fall to rise;
I fall, and yet by faith I stand;
I stand, and will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

8. Yield to me now—for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair!
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
Be conquer'd by my instant prayer;
Speak, or thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me, if thy name is love.

9. 'Tis love! 'tis love! thou diedst for me!
I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee:
Pure, universal love thou art;
To me, to all, thy passions move;
Thy nature and thy name is love.

10. My pray'r hath power with God; the grace
Unspeakable I now receive,
Through faith I see thee face to face;
I see thee face to face and live!
In vain I have not wept and strove;
Thy nature and thy name is love.

11. I know thee, Saviour, who thou art:
Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend;
Nor wilt thou with the night depart,
But stay and love me to the end;
Thy mercies never shall remove,
Thy nature and thy name is love.

12. The Sun of Righteousness on me
Hath rose, with healing in his wings;
Withered my nature's strength; from thee
My soul its life and comfort brings;
My help is all laid up above;
Thy nature and thy name is love.

13. Contented now, upon my thigh
I halt, till life's short journey end;
All helplessness, all weakness I,
On thee alone for strength depend,
Nor have I power from thee to move;
Thy nature and thy name is love.

14. Lame as I am, I take the prey,
Hell, Earth, and sin with ease o'ercome;
I leap for joy, pursue my way,
And as a bounding hart fly home,
Through all eternity to prove
Thy nature and thy name is love.