Sermon for 18th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

i

It is now time for Jacob to go home with his two wives, their maid servants and his eleven (and still counting) children that these women have produced between them. Exactly what happened that night is shrouded in mystery, time and folklore. Some say that Jacob wrestled with an angel; others say that he wrestled with a pre-Incarnation Jesus; others simply say it was with God. Perhaps it was an interior struggle that was expressed in folklore as a physical encounter – supplying a justification for a Jewish prohibition about which joints of meat are unacceptable to them. You must take your pick as to how you visualize the encounter; it is what this encounter **means** for Jacob and his subsequent descendants that matters to us.

Jacob is about to cross a river, but this is more than simply crossing a frontier. If we compare this story to those of Moses crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21-22), or Joshua crossing the Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant (Joshua 3:13), or Elisha and Elijah crossing the river with the use of a cloak (2 Kings 2:8-14), or John the Baptist across the Jordan (John 1:28), we can see that crossing a river often signifies more than merely changing geographical location; it often symbolises a spiritual journey also. Like baptism itself represents not just getting wet, but a spiritual, existential transformation, a journey from the old life into the new.

Symbolically it is night, for it is in the night that such spiritual wrestling with God envelops us. It is called the *dark night of the soul* for good reason. It is often in that vulnerable state of half-asleep and half-awake when our inner, repressed fears and doubts can surface and our unleashed imagination can range free and far in dreaming of new possibilities.

At the end of this night’s struggle Jacob extracts a blessing from God, but only at the cost of personal injury. The fight results in Jacob receiving a new name, from Jacob (meaning *deceiver*), he becomes Israel (meaning *he who wrestles with God*).

Jacob epitomises the ensuing struggle of his people and all those who belong to the ‘New Israel’ through Christ. The people of Israel are blessed; they are God’s children in way that no other nation can claim; they are entrusted with the knowledge of the one true God; by their faith the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ was possible. Yet, their blessing was also a burden. They constantly struggled to remain loyal to their God despite all the warnings the prophets brought. When they defaulted on their covenant obligations they were punished – such as in the Exile. When they remained faithful – they suffered at the hands of men – as in the Maccabean revolt against the Greeks.

Israel epitomises the wounded healer. It is a path the people of Israel have trodden throughout their years and it is the same path that opens up before anyone who comes to faith in Jesus, whose innocent death on a cross signifies the ultimate wounded healer.

For each of us will know after the exuberant joy of our conversion that there is a pain also to believing. We bear the pain of knowing what others deny and what others tell us we cannot know. We bear the pain of caring, when the world can choose not to hear. We bear the pain of being unable to help, when the world can choose not to consider it. We bear the pain of not being able to share the joy and comfort of knowing Jesus with those who urgently need him, but will not open up to him. We bear the pain of being such poor witnesses to the truths we claim and such poor channels of the love that we have received.

“Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39), the blessing, the joy, the comfort, the hope remain, but so does the pain of believing. Jacob bore the physical mark for the rest of his life as he limped away that following morning. We too must bear our spiritual scars for taking the cross of Christ upon us.

ii

In our passage from Romans 9:1-5 we see Paul experiencing a particularly acute form of anguish which many Christians continue to experience in varying degrees.

Paul speaks of his ‘great sorrow and unceasing anguish’ over the refusal of the majority of his Jewish compatriots to believe in Jesus. He says he would gladly surrender his own salvation, if thereby, he could secure theirs. He wrestles with the terrible irony that his forebears have been the essential link between God and the salvation of the world that has recently come through Jesus Christ. It is the Jewish people and their faith that supply Jesus’ human ancestry, Jesus’ culture, faith and holy scriptures which form the essential bedrock of the Christian Gospel that is built upon them.

How terrible the irony, that having played such an indispensable role, after having suffered for their faith for so long, that now they risk missing out on the fulfilment of their dreams. They are like the elder son who refuses to join the party when his long-lost prodigal brother finally comes home. In verse 8 Paul goes on to observe that it is now not the ‘natural children...but the children of the promise’ that shall inherit.

Paul stood at a dramatic moment in history. Had he been able to persuade the Jews to convert to Christ *en masse* the subsequent history of the world would have taken some different roads. Paul feels the pain of realising that he is losing the fight to win them over. His anguish is real and deep.

Such pain has been experienced by many since Paul’s day; the Word of God is like a two-edged sword and it can cut clean through ethnic bonds, family ties, and even lovers’ vows. In his letters to Corinth, Paul has to reluctantly set out some terms on which those families and couples who cannot be reconciled on the matter of following Jesus can amicably separate.

In today’s secular western society in which religious faith holds little sway for many, people may struggle to understand the deep divisions religious convictions can cause. There are so many examples of where such convictions have led to the sort of hatred and violence that such religious convictions are supposed to suppress that modern secular societies understandably wish for religion as a whole to just die off.

Yet faith will never die. Some forms of faith will pass away and some forms of faith deserve to pass away. But faith itself will remain. It will obviously remain if God exists. It will remain even if God doesn’t exist – either because we will never know for sure that God doesn’t exist and we will be genuinely mistaken, or because even atheists have a code of faith which instils convictions which they will fight to defend. We know from the history of Nazism and Communism that secular faith divides as keenly as theistic faith.

In the West we also know that some who call themselves liberals are among the most intolerant people we know. Such is the flaw of human sin and ignorance running through us all.

One of the inescapable pains of following Jesus is the separation that can cause between those who believe and loved ones who do not.

iii

In Jesus we have the supreme example of the wounded healer, the one who comes to save and heal, but only at great personal cost.

*The Feeding of the Five Thousand* follows immediately upon the news reaching Jesus that Herod Antipas has executed John the Baptist. The news disturbs Jesus not just because John was a cousin, but because it also foreshadows his own fate. There will be no avoiding the cup of suffering, despite his last minute plea in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus looks for a quiet spot to be alone, to think this thing through, but the crowd anticipates his movement and is there waiting for him. This thing is up and running now and there is no option but to follow it to its bitter, torturous end.

The miracle of the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* foreshadows that bitter end. The language of this feeding remarkably, and according to many scholars, deliberately mirrors the language of the Last Supper and the Eucharistic liturgies of the Church: Jesus took, gave thanks, broke and gave.

The additional detail in the account that Jesus’ reaction to the disciples’ worries for the assembled throng was to say to them: “**You** give them something to eat” further supports this interpretation. Jesus is anticipating the time when he will no longer be with them and they will have to take responsibility for caring for the people.

However, even then, they will succeed in their apostolic duties by bringing their concerns in faith to Jesus and trusting Jesus to supply the people’s needs through them.

For the disciples and the crowd the miraculous feeding was a moment of pure and unexpected joy. Just as God had supplied the needs of the Israelites in the Exodus, now Jesus was feeding the Israelites in the wilderness: The new Exodus was underway.

To Jesus, however, this event was tinged with a deep melancholy. In the light of John the Baptist’s fate, Jesus could see that the mission upon which he had embarked, and from which there was now no possible withdrawal, was going to lead to paying the ultimate price. For the time being, he allowed the disciples their untainted joy. There was time enough to warn them of the cost to come.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**October 2016**