

**Stones**

*Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25*

Stones have always fascinated me. On the coffee table in the manse drawing room I have a large bowl filled with stones from a variety of different places. One is from Hadrian's Wall, another from the Wailing Wall which is the last standing part of the ancient temple of Jerusalem. I have a stone from a C2nd AD church mosaic on the banks of the River Jordan, given to me by a Jordanian prince. I have a stone from Edinburgh Castle rock, and another from the estate around Balmoral. I was given a small stone from Iona Abbey, and another from works being carried out at Westminster Abbey. A stone from the Vatican rooftop. Stones used as a missiles from Gaza and Bethlehem. As well as stones from beaches around the country.

Around this building, stones form foundations, and rise up to form the walls, and encase the stained glass windows. They are around the steps and door frames. I suspect most of us never stop to look and wonder at the hands who quarried and cut and shaped and built with the stones that are in our homes and our pavements and roads.

Stones play their part in the Bible. They mark boundaries, they are hewn to build the Temple. Stones can stand for steadfastness; stones can be precious and used for decoration and enrichment. David picked five smooth stones in preparation for his battle with Goliath. Stones were used to construct altars. The Ten Commandments were written on tablets of stone. Hearts of stone are replaced with hearts of flesh. A stone is rolled across the entrance to Jesus' tomb on Good Friday; and a stone is rolled away on that first Easter Day.

And here, in the story of that difficult, tricky individual Jacob, untrustworthy, deceitful, yet chosen by God for blessing and to be the Father of the Tribes of Israel, a stone also plays a part. In a deserted place where Jacob would not have expected a religious experience, Jacob, the fugitive from his brother Esau, beyond all the protections of society, lays his weary head down, with a stone for a pillow.

God comes to the vulnerable Jacob in his sleep, to bind Himself to the treacherous fugitive. The waking world of Jacob was one of fear, terror, loneliness and unresolved guilt. Those were the parameters of Jacob's existence.<sup>1</sup> But into the desert world of Jacob's life, God comes with an alternative future. He comes with good news and with hope. The gospel moves in when Jacob's guard is down.

As a little side note, it is part of legend that the original Stone of Destiny on which Scottish monarchs were crowned, including Robert the Bruce, was not the lump of Perthshire sandstone currently in Edinburgh Castle, but a black, polished piece of meteorite, carved with ancient Celtic symbols as seen on the seals of Scottish Kings. Jacob's pillow, as it was known was said to have been brought from Egypt by a pharaoh's daughter (called Scota), via Spain to Ireland, and then to Scotland and Iona. It was said to be used by Columba (an Irish prince before he became an Abbot) as a seat for crowning Scottish kings and as a portable altar.

In his dream, with his head on the stone, Jacob saw that there was traffic between heaven and earth. Neither earth, nor Jacob, are left to their own resources. Heaven has to do with earth. Jacob presumed he travelled alone, with his only purpose being survival. With visions of angels, and of God Himself, earth becomes a place of possibility because it is never cut off from God's sustaining power.

The message the angels carry is that the Kingdom of God is at work. The old kingdom of fear and terror is overcome. God comes where He is not anticipated. God comes to change things. God promises a future to Jacob and to his descendants. What is more, God makes again that great divine promise, "I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go." It is a promise God makes time and again. It is the promise incarnate in the person of Jesus, God with us. Immanuel.

For Jacob, for us, however stony the ground we may be upon, Heaven has come to be on earth. The despairing fears of our lives and our world are refuted. God commits Himself to the isolated and fearful Jacob. God commits Himself to us. We are not abandoned. God will go with us.

It is astonishing that the message we have as Christians from Jesus that He will be with us to the end of time, is to be found here in the dream of Jacob, with his head resting on a stone pillow in the middle of a desert.

God will be present with us, and God will keep us. The promise made to Jacob is also made to us. And then we, like Jacob, will be blessed, and brought home. His head resting on a stone, Jacob has a dream from God that promises accompaniment, protection, and homecoming.

Jacob awakes, and responds. He embraces the dream, he accepts God's kingdom is at hand, he abandons his old ways, and he gives thanks for the awesome presence of God. He takes the stone upon which his head has rested, and puts it on a pillar, and worships God. He calls the place Beth-el – which means *The House of God*. He restates God's promise, that God will be with him, that God will keep him, that God will provide for him, and that God will give him a home. This stone-dreamt encounter with God transforms Jacob's life.

This holy place, this Bethel, this house of God, is tied up with a promise God makes, and keeps, with humanity. In the hard times of life, what do you dream of? Where have you felt the awe of God's presence? What promises from God do you remember when you visit places that are holy to you?

These are the questions that this ancient parable from the life of Jacob leave with us, and their answers should be as real to us as they were to Jacob. God with us. God protecting us, God providing for us, God calling us home.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, pps241-248