

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

There will not be one person here in Church this morning, or watching online, who does not have some story of sadness, struggle or pain to tell from the months of lockdown. The physical, emotional and psychological cost will be immense. Not that most of us haven't struggled on, but there will be few experiences in recent decades that will match the awfulness of these days. We are not there yet, there are still weeks to come with many ups and downs, but please God let us now see some light at the end of the tunnel.

Not that there wasn't light along the way. The acts of simple kindness, friendship and good neighbourliness will be innumerable, and I am so pleased to say that the members and friends of this congregation have played a significant part in the life of our community. It was often there, quietly beneath the surface, good people doing good things. But this time of crisis has brought to light so much that has been so very good in a time that has been so very difficult.

But it has been a struggle. And it still is: people wrestling with physical issues brought on by lockdown restrictions; people wrestling with issues that have affected their mental health and brought times of depression and anxiety; people wrestling with deep concerns about work and jobs; about money and family; about the future of this Church (and every faith community), and about the future of our country. Wrestling with what the future will be is going to be a big issue for all of us in some way or other. Sometimes, it might even feel that we are wrestling with things on our own. And that's hard too.

- In the story of Jacob, he is often left alone, and this time he wrestled at night with God. What are the things that you have wrestled with over these last months?

I don't know about you but for me, problems always seem worse at night than they do during the daytime. The darkness amplifies and expands even the smallest of problems. Jacob found this. Having cheated his brother he was still on the run from him; fearful that his past would catch up with him and that trouble would overwhelm him. On his own, in the desert, once again he

encounters...well, who? It says, 'a man', but it might have been an angel, and more likely it is God. Jacob won't be the last person to have wrestled with God. What, then, have you wrestled with God about? What has caused you to shout at heaven and ask why this; why now; why me? One of the things we need to remember is God has heard it all before. God has broad shoulders, and a broad mind, and an even broader heart. The Psalms are full of people arguing with God. Job argues with God. So does Moses. As people argue, or wrestle, sometimes they learn something about themselves; sometimes they learn something about God. What we say to God and to ourselves in the heat of anger, or the depth of despair, or the coldness of doubt, says something about us. God was up for Jacob; God is up for us.

- In the wrestling, why would Jacob not let go of God, and why does God not let go of Jacob? In wrestling with God, we note that Jacob is strong. It lasted all night. What a man Jacob is. He may have been frightened of God and his brother Esau. But in the fray he will hold his own with either one. Jacob is injured in the wrestling with God, but he is not defeated. He holds on. What kind of God is it Who will be pressed to a draw by this man? And what kind of man is Jacob that he can force a draw with God?ⁱ Jacob has been blessed by his father Isaac, and stolen Esau's birthright. Now he wrestles with God because his underlying insecurity needed further reassurance. Jacob wanted an even greater blessing. From God. And he refused to let go. Maybe this is why God clung on to Jacob, not in weakness or submission, but with a love that would not let Jacob go until Jacob knew what it was that he really needed in his life.

God holds on to us, through thick and thin, through all the wrestling, until we work out what it is that we really need in our lives.

"Language about fighting and struggling is present all through the Bible...at the heart of our faith is the express intention that our religion should not be an opiate, a drug, an escape, but an encounter in which we wrestle and fight and pray."ⁱⁱ

- What might we learn about ourselves, and God, when we struggle?

John Bell writes that, "Implanted in each of us is a debating chamber without chairs where some of the fiercest arguments we experience take place and we witness them on our own. And we call

that debating chamber our conscience, the cause of sleepless nights, sometimes the cause of swithering over decisions, sometimes the mechanism which, without words, questions our actions.

Undoubtedly one of the reasons why we read the Bible and preach from it, one of the reasons we learn about the teaching of Jesus, is not so that we can have a set of unthinking rules to live by; but so that our consciences can be informed by what is right. And that involves wrestling. Life, and faith, are not given to us on a plate. There is struggle. And as we struggle, we learn.

Jacob is made to wrestle; not like Job wrestling with his doubts; or Jeremiah wrestling with his anger, or Jesus wrestling in Gethsemane with His vocation. Jacob wrestles with God Who has come to upset his life, and to make him think, and change. God comes to us in struggles that we would rather avoid, perhaps, just perhaps, in order that we might know God better.

God did not send Covid-19 so that we might get to know God better. But God has worked through this time of struggle and dislocation and hurt and pain, so that we, who might have sailed on regardless, have had to stop and look long and hard at our world.

Community was there before Covid, but did we know all of our neighbours and their needs. Illness was there before Covid, but did we know just how many physically vulnerable people there were in our community, in our church? Loneliness and isolation were there before Covid, but had we really appreciated how many isolated people there are around us? The Church was there before Covid, but did we really think how much the worship and fellowship and support and care and beauty that we took for granted each week actually was woven into the very fabric of our lives?

Through this time of upset and distress, God has wrestled with us, and as we have held on to God asking why, so God has held on to us to make us think and work out with God what it is that really matters in a good world, a good church, a good life.

This time of national pandemic has brought out the very best, and the very worst, in all of us. We have learned how we cope, and do not cope. We have learned in lockdown how easily disconnected we can become, and how dependent on others we truly are. We have learned where the fault lines run along our lives, and where we snap, and where we are broken. We learn who

our true friends are, and how so many people, even in adversity, will rise to the challenge, and go the extra mile, and do what needs to be done for the least and the lost and the last.

That's why we wrestle with God, and that's why God wrestles with us, refusing to let go, until we, like Jacob, confess our need of blessing, and then, even limping away wounded, find that in the desert night God, the relentless blesser, was with us all along. The God with Whom we wrestle and fight and pray. So that we might learn again what the world is meant to be, and what we, the children of God, are meant to become.

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

Amen

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, p267

ⁱⁱ John Bell, Wrestle and Fight and Pray. Thoughts on Christianity and Conflict p47