

Meditation. Jacob wrestles with God. Genesis 32 v22 – 31 Abridged

I have been thinking about this passage in Genesis for some time now and what I originally wanted to say has changed.....

but first, to set the scene for you, Jacob and Esau were twins. They were born to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau was the first to be born followed by Jacob who seemed to be hanging on to Esau's heel. Esau became a skilful hunter and a favourite of his father Isaac, whilst Rebekah loved Jacob.

Jacob was rather a cunning and wily character. Reading about his life in Genesis, one can see that he was often planning ahead and manoeuvring situations to his advantage.

We can learn about the early lives of Esau and Jacob in Genesis chapters 25, 27 and 28. We read how on one occasion Jacob manages to persuade Esau to sell his birth right for the price of a meal. Birth right was pretty important in those days; it gave the eldest son inheritance rights and a position of authority within the family.

Later, with the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob deceives Isaac and takes the blessing that rightfully belonged to the eldest son. The account of how that happened is found in Genesis 27. Before we judge Rebekah too harshly for favouritism, we must remember that God had told her the elder brother would serve the younger before the twins were even born. Perhaps Rebekah saw qualities in Jacob that better befitted him to become the authority within the family. We can only conjecture! Needless to say, Esau is distraught and makes a vow to himself to kill Jacob after his Father's death. Once again Rebekah is instrumental in planning for Jacob and sends him off to her brother Laban in Harran until Esau's fury abates.

Jacob flees. He rests on the way there and falling asleep, has a dream where he sees a ladder into heaven with angels walking up and down on it. God promises to be with Jacob, to make his descendants as numerous as the dust and to bring him back to Canaan. Jacob works for Laban for over 20 years, acquires two wives and becomes very rich – again often through cunning and deceitful means. Eventually Jacob's relationship with Laban and his sons deteriorates. Jacob once again flees. He is at last on his way home with his family and many belongings.

Jacob however is tormented by fear. He feels guilt no doubt at what he took from his brother through deceit and cunning, and sends messengers ahead of him to speak with Esau, with a report of his own wealth hoping this will appease Esau's probable anger. The messengers return with the news that Esau has set out to meet them, bringing with him four hundred men.

Genesis 32 v7 and 8 read 'In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, 'If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.'

Then Jacob prays.....

He reminds God of the promises made to him in the past; promises to bless and prosper him; promises to be with him. Jacob realises his unworthiness but tells God of his fear that Esau will attack him and his family. He asks for God's protection.

Then, Jacob sends great herds of animals ahead of the company as gifts, hoping to pacify Esau.

Jacob is full of fear, full of guilt, full of shame.

He spends the night in the camp, sending his wives, the female servants, his eleven sons and all his possessions ahead of him to cross the river Jabbok. At last Jacob is alone – alone with all his fear; his guilt at what he had done in the past; his deep shame at what he had become – a deceiver and a cheat. Jacob is alone with God.

What happens then is an amazing account of how God deals with Jacob, and how he addresses Jacob's feelings of fear and shame.

Shame is pervasive in our culture. We all suffer from it to some degree or other. We can recognise the feeling of wanting the ground to open up and swallow us whole. Shame is often not rooted in reality but in deceit. It compares us to impossible ideals. It exaggerates our faults. It tells us we will never measure up. 'Are you not ashamed?' It tells us we are not thin enough; not intelligent enough; not young enough; not a good enough mother, father, son or daughter; not got the right job; not got a job..... The list goes on. We all have our own sensitivities, situations that cause us to feel shame.

It makes me think of the verse in Hebrews 12 that says of Jesus 'For the joy that was set before him, he endured the Cross, despising the shame.' Jesus was vulnerable all throughout his life. He stood up and let himself be seen. He spoke up for the poor and the needy, spoke up for justice, showed solidarity with those whom society had marginalised and rejected. Vulnerability opens oneself to pain, criticism, disconnection and shame, but Jesus refused to hide, refused to run away or change his message to suit his critics. Vulnerability rather than weakness, is pure courage. As he faced the Cross, what was Jesus saying? 'I will face the shame of abandonment, the shame of nakedness, the shame of mockery and being spat at. I will endure the shame of facing a death reserved for criminals.' Why? Because vulnerability exposes us not only to pain but has also the potential for deepest joy. As Jesus felt the shame of the Cross, he reached out in compassion to the thief next to him, he sought connection and he expressed no judgment. Jesus prays, saying 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' This is not sympathy that stands separate, saying 'I feel sorry for you'. This is empathy. He is saying 'Father I know these human beings. I understand them. I stand WITH them. I see their fear and mistakes but I have compassion on them. I seek to restore relationship with them. Let us forgive.' Are we not included there? This astounding act of empathy is the source of deepest joy – it is the heart of redemption and reconnection.

And Jacob? God honours him by not turning his back on him. Jacob wrestles with God. This fight is not a little tête à tête! It is eyeball to eyeball and fist to fist! God engages with Jacob, is alongside him, and Jacob doesn't give up: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me'. Jacob comes away limping, showing the marks. What does God say to him? God gives him a new name. God is saying; 'I know you and yes you have made mistakes, but these don't define you. They don't say who you are. Remember I said you would prosper; your descendants be as numerous as the dust; all the peoples of the earth be blessed through you.' Jacob went forward then in the strength of that knowledge.

And what does that say to us? We need the courage to be vulnerable and let ourselves be seen, in standing up for the needy; the weak; the lost and marginalised, yes, but also in what may seem to be less important ways which are yet vital for our lives. We show vulnerability when we are ourselves, authentic, showing our own truth. Hiding, being afraid won't protect us from the shame and pain that comes from simply living or from the judgment and criticism when we stand true to ourselves.

In our pain, we respond to shame by reaching out to each other in compassion and nonjudgment, in standing beside each other, as Jesus did. We can only be creative and risk if we refuse to worry about what others are thinking. Vulnerability is risk taking. It dares to be, in spite of our imperfections, and so we are challenged to love and serve God and the community.

Most importantly we remember who we are. We are not defined by our mistakes or our pasts – they are wrapped in the Love and Forgiveness of God. We are challenged and changed by that love. We are defined by that love. We are beloved of God. Amen.