

Jacob Wrestling with the Angel

(Genesis 32:23-33)

I want to let you into a secret: I am not a particularly good chess player. In fact, I am rather mediocre.

However, a few years ago when I was working in science, I shared an office with a colleague, Martin, who I knew was playing in the highest German chess league and who is by now well on his way to becoming a chess Grand Master. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity of losing a game against a really good player, I asked him whether he would be up for a game of chess.

After what must have been about five minutes of playing, I made a move that I thought was quite smart. I felt cocky and asked Martin what he thought of that move. His response was that I would lose in eight moves. I felt a bit annoyed and did what I thought was a smart move. The consequence of this was that I did not lose in eight moves but in three.

Clearly, when you are competing with somebody who is massively out of your league, you should expect a quick defeat. In most situations, if a David faces up against a Goliath, Goliath wins, quickly and decisively.

In the story that has been read to us, we are faced with a different account. A lone stranger, Jacob, is on the way home to meet his estranged brother whom he has not seen for some twenty years that he had to spend in exile. As he is about to meet his brother the next day, he sends his whole family and copious gifts ahead of himself to appease his brother. He himself stays all alone at a river and – most likely anxiously – awaits the next day.

It is at this point where he is all alone, where his family and his wealth are no longer with him that he is attacked by who turns out to be God. In such a situation, you should expect that God will win, quickly and decisively. Jacob should not even be allowed to land as much as a punch.

Instead, what we are told that they wrestle until daybreak and that Jacob could not be overpowered. Only right at the end does God touch Jacob's hip joint to thereby disable him and end the fight. If that was the "winning move" of sorts,

why did it not occur earlier? Why did God not defeat Jacob outright and thereby saved Jacob lots of effort?

In my opinion, this way of looking at the story may miss the point by focussing on the end result, rather than the process Jacob went through. Maybe God was not there to defeat him but to make him experience something through the fight that he would not be able to learn any differently? It seems that this experience – or maybe the experience of the years in exile – had changed Jacob's character. As a consequence, from then onwards, he would be known as "Israel", "he who struggles with God".

For me, a "struggling with God"-story was moving to the UK to study in Cambridge and trying to find ways of living my faith there. I come from a rather typical German Lutheran background, and whilst church has definitely been a big part of my life, my faith was never a black and white issue.

Coming to Cambridge, I found that the Christian scene was definitely quite different, and it seemed to me that the loudest voices were those that advocated a conservative evangelical Calvinistic type of Christianity. I distinctly remember having a chat with a curate who casually informed that a friend of mine who had killed himself would end up in hell unless that friend had managed to convert to Christianity in the last few minutes of his life.

Whilst I did try to discuss things with friends, those conversations did not lead anywhere. To me, it seemed to be the case that I either had to swallow those facts and get on board with that way of thinking or to give up completely on faith, even though it was certainly an important aspect of my life.

This seeming isolation, and the struggle with something that was threatening a big part of who I am, reminds me of Jacob being all by himself at the Jabbok river and struggling with God. And, like that struggle with God, it took me a long time to come to terms with those topics that bothered me so profoundly.

In the end, the struggle left me with a greater appreciation for other ways of approaching faith topics, whether those approaches are more conservative or more liberal, more Catholic or more Calvinistic, than my way of thinking and believing.

What are your struggles with God?

There is another aspect of the passage which makes it my favourite Old Testament story, and that is to do with the sheer physicality of Jacob's encounter.

I'll be honest: Most of the time, I have a rather sanitized image of God. I am happy to say the creed, and I believe that God created the world and what is in it. I am willing to pray for people and hope that those prayers will be answered. However, if the answer is too dramatic, I get a tiny bit suspicious. I am happy to acknowledge the triune nature of God and that God became human – probably because I have said it so many times that the enormity of those statements gets lost on me. However, any experiences of God that are more unusual than that get a bit suspicious. In most circumstances, the world as I perceive it is a world of scepticism. A world that has, as Bonhoeffer put it, “come of age”.

This passage that we have been read is a direct challenge to that way of perceiving the world. We have an encounter between a human and God. God is not portrayed as a disembodied spirit or as a divine supernatural being. Rather, he is portrayed as a wrestler. As a person who physically engages Jacob.

Reading through those passages as somebody who played Judo for several years, you can almost feel the intensity of the struggle and smell the sweat of the two persons struggling to grip the other person, trying to wrestle each other to the ground. There is nothing dignified about a wrestling fight. You are left with scratches and bruises and utterly exhausted, and there are few things that are as physical as this. It is a primordial encounter.

It is hard for me to imagine anything more remote from the sanitized “come of age”-image of God that I have grown so fond of. And yet, maybe that is the lesson for me, a 21st century theoretical physicist working in an obscure area of law: God is wholly other than the image that I cherish so much. And, in the same way, I should be prepared to revise – or even throw overboard – any other images that I got used to.

In our lack of an understanding of who God is, let us all appreciate that God will transcend any images that we have got ourselves used to.

