



**AFC 275**

**Genesis 32.22-31**

**Matthew 14.13-21**

**2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020**

**Struggling with Faith**

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## ALL AGE TALK: Wrestling with God

I watched an episode of Priest School recently on the telly. It's set in the Scot's College in Rome and charts the progress of trainee Roman Catholic Priests. Last year's new intake contained former teachers, lawyers, a DJ and a taxi driver.

It's good that those of us called to full time service in the church come from a variety of backgrounds.

My first pastorate was in Kettering at a church named after its former minister from the 18<sup>th</sup> century: The Revd Andrew Fuller.

His image in one of the stained glass windows shows he was a robust, square jawed individual. Read his biography and much is made of the fact that before becoming a minister he was a Pugilist: a wrestler or a boxer.

Perhaps that stood him in good stead. He lived at a time when strict Calvinists, like himself, thought God didn't need our help sharing the gospel. Fuller battled, he 'wrestled', against that way of thinking. He convinced other Baptist Ministers that Christians should be active in sharing their faith and this group, in 1792, formed the Baptist Missionary Society – which still exists today. Fuller became its first Secretary and William Carey its pioneer missionary.

It only came about because Andrew Fuller wrestled with his faith and the applied it in a new way as he came to a fresh understanding.

In today's reading and sermon we'll encounter another wrestler – Jacob. And we'll ponder the value that comes our way when we wrestle with ideas about God and life that can end up, not weakening our faith, but making it stronger.

Minister: For the Word of God is scripture  
**All: For the Word of God among us**  
Minister: For the Word of God within us  
**All: Thanks be to God. Amen**

Jacob is pivotal to Israel's story of faith.

He's something of a winner. His grandfather was Abraham and his fraternal twin was Esau, who he cheated out of his inheritance. So Jacob becomes the head of the family and through his twelve sons, who become the twelve tribes, he ends up as the great patriarch and father of the nation, one that even bears his new name of *Israel*.

His story is sometimes confusing. He is a cheat and a liar, yet he is blessed by God. So, it becomes a tale of human weakness and fallibility set alongside God's mercy and grace.

We meet him in today's reading returning home after 20 years away. He's been on his father-in-law's farm but now he's heading back; back to potential conflict with his estranged brother Esau. This wasn't an easy home coming.

The bible often portrays journeys as moments of transformation. In the words of a hymn we often sing at the Turn of the Year: *It's from the old we travel to the new...*

The very definition of a journey is that we have left one place, one state of mind and being as we set our sights on something different, which might even entail us becoming different.

The jury is still out, I guess, as to whether or not this Virus Pandemic has been a real turning point for our world. Will we truly be different people and different nations, come the end of all this?

Whether or not Jacob was at such a seminal moment in his life, this story shows us that even at a moment of new beginnings we still take our past with us. It's still part of us and flavours the future.

Jacob is aware that Esau was preparing to meet him by surrounding himself with 400 men. Jacob's re-entry into his brother's life was fraught with potential conflict because neither of them could forget that day, years ago, when one brother cheated on the other.

After sending his wife and children on – which seems like a despicable act of cowardice, ensuring that they, in some perverse way acted as a buffer between him and Esau, Jacob is, for once in his life, alone. And perhaps it is significant that it's at this very moment of 'aloneness', experiencing silence instead of conversation, having empty space instead of crowded responsibilities, that he finally seems to catch up with God.

What happens next is cryptic. The story has him experiencing a night of struggle. It's as if an intruder has broken into his chamber and they spend long hours wrestling with each other. Neither seems to be winning and by dawn they are still fighting. Eventually the intruder strikes Jacob's hip and seems to dislocate it. From now on he walks with a limp, a mark of that night's encounter.

Is this imaginary? Was the intruder God? Maybe this could be an allegory for prayer?

Perhaps the answer is 'yes' to all those questions. Maybe it's no! Yet the nature of religious myth stories is that they are precious narratives containing deep truths.

The night of fighting is surely central to the story. Even his new name, Israel, reflects the events of that night, meaning; the one who fights and prevails with God. Yet again, Jacob, now Israel, is viewed as a winner.

So, what can a tale like today's teach us about faith? Well, maybe we sometimes expect our faith journey to be passive? We might think that following God is best done when we are readily compliant and willingly submissive. If God is our teacher, shouldn't we be the keen student hanging on every word, always trying to hand in our homework on time.

Today's narrative from the Jewish Scriptures blows that model of faith out

of the water.

Judaism has a wonderful tradition of asking awkward questions. At Passover the youngest in the room starts the evening by questioning its origin. The routine teaching method for a Rabbi was to engage in robust debate with students. Even at the Temple the boy Jesus is found asking questions of the Elders.

Wrestling with God, probing ideas and exploring their consequences, grappling with inconsistencies – all these seem to be part and parcel of a biblical understanding of discipleship.

So, put it in an educational context, and there's nothing wrong with being that student at the back of the class who's always asking 'why' and who cannot be fobbed off with bland answers.

Asking questions, even struggling with faith – well maybe the conclusion we draw from this story is – that's OK, even normal on most peoples' pilgrimage.

Actually, if we broaden this story out a little it's not even clear that too many questions are answered by dawn.

The tale goes like this, Jacob simply didn't give up the struggle with this intruder. It lasted all night, so that by dawn, recognising his tenacity, the intruder departs. Yet, Jacob will bear the scar of this struggle for the rest of his life.

There are times when I just love the honesty of the bible. Could this actually be a story that speaks to us of the way that some of our deepest struggles do mark us for life. Faith doesn't protect us against the possibilities of divorce or cancer, or the certainty of death. Life is never risk free and neither do we inevitably discover the answers to those big 'why' questions we ask from our chair at the back of the class.

Yet, like Jacob, we don't give up the struggle. We keep at it. We keep on engaging.

I remember Terry Wogan's wonderfully self-deprecating reaction on hearing he'd been awarded a knighthood, he said: *the British public have always confused longevity with talent.*

Well, maybe that's true! But, one of the central lessons in today's story is that one image for faith is that of just keeping going, of a dedicated all night struggle, and not giving up even if the questions haven't been answered by morning.

As I read today's story I come away with a picture of God who is inclusive but not predictable, yet always generous.

This story paints God in inclusive colours; he can use even a Jacob – a schemer and a dreamer. Wherever we are on the Myers Briggs spectrum or whatever personality type we've discovered we are: God can use us.

Yet, to follow this God is to find a certain unpredictability in faith. As CS Lewis said of Aslan, a metaphor for God in the Chronicles of Narnia: *He isn't a tame lion!*

Maybe one of the functions of God is to draw the best out of us. That often happens through love, yet surprisingly maybe, it can also occur through struggle. Maybe it is in the 'night time of our fears', when, in the words of John Bunyan, we face *the hobgoblins and foul fiends* of our life, in these moments of struggle, which might even scar us, we discover the best of ourselves in the context of the faithfulness of an ever present God who shares the struggle with us.

And lastly, this is the God who time and again generously blesses us. The God who is for us. The God who made Jacob the father of a great nation, the God, who in Jesus, took loaves and fish and feed the multitude, the God who even in these past days has entered into our world's pain and shown us a way of courage, kindness, love and compassion.

Whatever our questions, remember Jacob, and never give up the struggle. May it be so in the name of God who accepts us, challenges us and walks, everyday, beside us in blessing. Amen

*Ian Green Amersham: 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020*