

Fourth Sunday after Trinity 2019 (14.07.19)

Choral Evensong

Genesis 32: 9 – 30; Mark 7: 1 – 23

There was a lad being brought up in a good Jewish home. They kept the Sabbath every week, had the meal, honoured the tradition; the lad went to Synagogue with his dad; and when it was time he had his Bar Mitzvah. As adolescence began he started to have some independent thoughts. Eventually he plucked up his courage, steeled his nerves and told his mother he had come to the conclusion that he was an agnostic. His mother just laughed at him and told him to get in the queue behind all the other giants of the scriptures: even Jacob didn't become Israel until he'd spent the night wrestling with God.

Abraham, Jacob, Moses: they all fight with God. The psalmist rails against God: questioning, doubting, complaining. That's the dynamic of a life of faith. if faith is to have integrity, it must be space for enquiry,

exploration, discussion, doubt, challenge, struggle, aridity – even periodic desolation. Because, otherwise, where's the reality? Where's the depth of relationship with God?

A faith which admits no doubt, which never encounters any struggle, is a shallow and immature faith. In human relationships, it's in the early stages of courtship that everything's fine and dandy and we can see no wrong in each other. It's only as the relationship gets deeper that we have to face up to the reality that sometimes the other person irritates the hell out of us and what hard work it is to negotiate how to live together.

Jesus told his disciples that he had come to give them life, and life in all its fullness. Jesus doesn't give life with an unremitting cheesy grin on your face. Because fullness of life isn't like that. Fullness of life involves anguish and grief as much as it involves joy and contentment. And so a deep and mature faith doesn't

always manage to put on a good religious show. Because there's something more profound going on than just getting it right. I'm sure this is what Mark's gospel is saying when it speaks about what is inside being more important than what can be outwardly seen: it's about integrity of intention rather than religious performance.

In E M Forster's "Where Angels Fear to Tread" the earnest, evangelical Miss Abbott comes back from her travels on the continent alone because her companion, Lilia, has fallen in love with an Italian and has stayed on to set up a most improper ménage with him. She subsequently bears a child to Gino and then dies. Miss Abbott tears back to Italy to rescue this poor child from Gino, this brutish, vulgar, working class foreigner, only to be disoriented when she is confronted with the inescapable fact that there is a bond of love between father and child. Forster says "The horrible truth, that wicked people are capable of love, stood naked before her, and her moral being was

abashed . . . the comfortable sense of virtue left her." Then he says – and this is the killer – "She was in the presence of something greater than right or wrong."

There had been an awful lot in Jacob's life that had been plainly wrong before he got his hip dislocated by wrestling with God at Penuel. He'd tricked his brother out of his birth-right and his father's blessing. He'd put himself so far in the wrong he'd had to flee for his life. But when we contemplate Jacob, we are in the presence of something that is greater than right or wrong. We recognise, we are forced to recognise, that there is a greatness in Jacob that cannot be denied because he has a certain number of whopping transgressions chalked up against his record. The greatness comes from the fact he had the inner strength, the spiritual stature to wrestle with God. And that gives him a greatness that outweighs what can be seen, outwardly, on the face of his record. When we contemplate Jacob, we are in the presence of a profound relationship with God.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

And when we contemplate Jacob we are invited to look deep within ourselves; to look beyond the correctness of our religious practices; to look beyond our ability to give all the right religious answers, to trot the party line; and we're invited in the depths of our being to forge a relationship with God that is strong enough to doubt and challenge and dares to fight back.

Amen.