

**Third Sunday of Lent 2016 evening**

**Genesis 28: 10 – 19**

Observing a holy Lent sets us off on a journey of empathy Jesus. We listen to stories of Jesus travelling between two places. He is on his way up to Jerusalem. He is in between Galilee, where his entire earthly ministry has taken place so far, and Jerusalem which will be the scene for his final confrontation and triumph over the forces of destruction. And we journey with him in spirit towards Gethsemane. So, by this point, week three in Lent, just as he is in an in-between place, we are empathetically in an in-between place. And we've come to this in-between place having stripped away, on Ash Wednesday, any false pretence we may have harboured about the nature of the human condition: we are aware of our vulnerability, not to say our wretchedness: we are dust.

As we arrive at this point we read in our Old Testament lesson this evening one of the foundational

stories about the nature of the faith that the Judeo-Christian tradition presents. It is that we believe in a God who makes himself present to people, no matter who they are, no matter where they are, and transforms their situation.

The opening line of our story simply states that Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. The back-story is that the reason he left Beersheba is that he was a fugitive. He's tricked his brother, Esau, out of his birth-right. He's utterly unworthy and vulnerable to the vengeance of his brother. And he hasn't arrived at any particular place. He just runs out of day-light and rests at the place he happens to have got to.

And yet it is to such a person, in such a condition, in such a place that this remarkable, seminal theophany takes place. God appears to Jacob with all the razzmatazz there could possibly be: dream, ramp between earth and heaven, and angles. It is a classic formulary for the revelation of God to be through

dreams. Only the most holy of places had ramps, or ladders, to connect where God was to where he was revealed: they had them on Mesopotamian ziggurats. And angels are the messengers of God who do his bidding, bearing the message that what is promised is actually happening in the here and now. All these features are present in circumstances where you would think it least likely to find them.

And these features provide the setting for promises to Jacob. There is the formulaic promise God always seems to make about descendants etc. but then there are personal promises, particular to Jacob. God promises that he is with Jacob. God with us! These are words that should have Christian ears pricking up with heightened appreciation of their significance. This is Jesus-talk: Emmanuel, God-with-us. This is the promise of God.

And promises that he is not only with Jacob, but that he will keep him. No matter how helpless he may be,

God will protect Jacob in all circumstances. Furthermore there is a third element to the promise. God will guarantee a home-coming, that Jacob will not always be in an in-between place, will not always be a fugitive.

This threefold promise encapsulates the full complement of the good news of the Christian faith: presence, protection, home-coming. And hearing that message at this stage in Lent does not deflect us from the realism and honesty about ourselves that Lenten discipline requires. Identifying with Jacob doesn't tempt us to think we are any better than we are. And yet we are offered the possibility of transformation.

This in-between place, this nowhere-in-particular to which Jacob had come was to become a great place of pilgrimage and religious significance. The story tells us he set up and anointed an altar. Thus what had been nowhere became somewhere. He was equipped by his encounter with God to make it a somewhere.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

And that somewhere later became revered. But Jacob only became equipped because he responded to God and bound himself to him.

So the invitation that this story offers to us is to hang on in there, bind ourselves to God, no matter how ambivalent this point in Lent may seem; and be inspired to complete the rest of the empathetic journey we are on, confident that we will have the resources with which to encounter Gethsemane and Calvary and to celebrate the homecoming of Easter Day.

Amen.