

Seventh Sunday after Trinity (Evensong)

Genesis 32: 9 – 30

There's a joke about a good Jewish lad who has been brought up in an observant Jewish family. He's had the honour of taking part as they've kept the Sabbath meal every week. He was prepared rigorously for his Bar mitzvah and then duly started to take his place in Synagogue with his father. Shortly afterwards, though, he began to struggle quiet seriously with his faith and found it harder and harder in all conscience to go through the religious rituals. He put off and put off the need to say anything about all this to his parents until in the end he steeled his nerve and told his mother that he thought he was an agnostic. She said congratulations, now you can take your place in the queue behind Abraham and Moses and all the rest of them.

That was it, by the way: that was the punch line; it's not going to get any funnier. But, more significantly, a

serious has been made. All the giants of the Hebrew Scriptures are people who have the integrity to question God. And this evening's Old Testament lesson is perhaps the most classic of them all.

Jacob is a despicable wretch who, quite understandably, has been on the run. He's been trying to keep out of the way of his brother, Esau, because he'd tricked him out of his birth-right. Jacob had impersonated Esau by pretending he was a hairy man whereas, in fact, he was the brother who was smooth skinned. So his blind father, Isaac, had thought he was Esau and had blessed him instead of Esau. And once the blessing had been given, it was too late to undo it. Therein lies a big distinction between the Biblical law of blessing and the English Law of Contract – but ask Jordan about that, not me, because he's the one about to get a Practising Certificate and I've not had one for donkeys' years. But, just accept it as read that the blessing cannot be undone. Jacob is a serious rogue. He perpetrated the most significant fraud there's

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probably ever been in the history of the human race. That's just one part of the story.

The other part of the story is that this self-same man is the founding father of the people Israel. Israel is Jacob, and his descendants bear his name. Quite apart from the faith claims of the Jewish people, even if we adopt a value-neutral anthropological position, the Jews are the most remarkable people. They are unique in having a discrete combined religious and ethnic identity. I think some Sikhs might take exception to that claim, but I think it holds good – they are unique in having a discrete combined religious and ethnic identity. That identity has persisted for (what?) five thousand years; and has not only withstood the natural processes of dilution and assimilation into other cultures but has endured domination, dislocation and the worst, industrialised genocide history has ever known. And they have made perhaps the most extensive and long-lasting cultural and religious impact there has ever been. Add to that the

faith claims that we do make as Christians, and they are also God's chosen people, though whom God's identity has been revealed. And the founding father of all that is the rogue Jacob.

The transition between those two parts of the story is the passage we've had read to us as our Old Testament lesson this evening. Jacob becomes Israel. But he cannot become Israel until he has wrestled with God to the extent that he is left disabled as a result of it. Just like all the other spiritual giants, he has to be honestly agnostic. He has to be honest first with his brother Esau and then with God - and that's painful.

This story tells us not only that being agnostic, entertaining doubt, challenging God, struggling with faith and all that sort of stuff have a noble pedigree; it also tells us that such things are an essential ingredient of authentic, dynamic and productive faith.

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This story of transition, of the transformation of Jacob into Israel is a working example of the words attributed to Augustine of Hippo, the founder (or at least the inspiration) for the religious order in the legacy of one of whose monasteries we have our being as Priory Church; those words surrounding the Agnus Dei carving on the tree stump by the church gate: there is no saint without a past and no sinner without a future. The example is a working example because it shows the process through which that transition takes place: honesty, making amends and spiritual hard work.

I've been wrestling with whether to leave this sermon there or whether to make some more concluding comments. I've wrestled because what I want to say is undoubtedly judgmental; and it's judgmental about someone who isn't here to answer for himself, although goodness only knows we've heard enough from him in recent days. Because I'm convinced that this story of transition, or transformation, is capable of

giving us some insight into why Tony Blair's response to the Chilcott report has been so inadequate. It's not sufficient for him simply to say that the deaths of service personnel in Iraq, not to mention the bloody chaos that has ensued, weighs more heavily on his conscience than we can ever know. (Were those his words? If not, I hope I'm paraphrasing him faithfully.) It's necessary to admit you're wrong, to attempt to make amends and, most importantly, to allow yourself to be wounded. That's the sort of material God works with.

Amen.