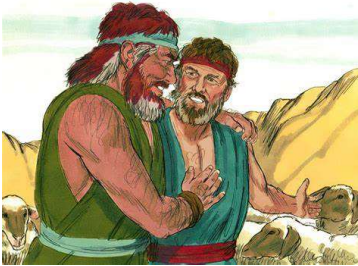


SERMON – ZOOM, 16 OCTOBER 2022 – GENESIS 32.22-31



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The OT lesson caught my eye – the story of Jacob wrestling with God. One of those OT stories I vaguely remember reading when younger, studying when I did theology degrees – but stories I haven't really read for years. I need to encourage myself to re-read these, and I encourage you to do the same.



Genesis 25 – Abraham's son Isaac becomes the father of twins, Esau and Jacob – Esau the man who liked the outdoor life, Jacob quiet and studious. Life was not easy – famine, tribal disagreements, having to make space for flocks and herds in a desert environment. You will remember that Jacob steals his brother's blessing – Isaac is tricked into blessing Jacob, not Esau – but Isaac sends him away to Mesopotamia, right over to the east, the area we now know as Iraq. 4



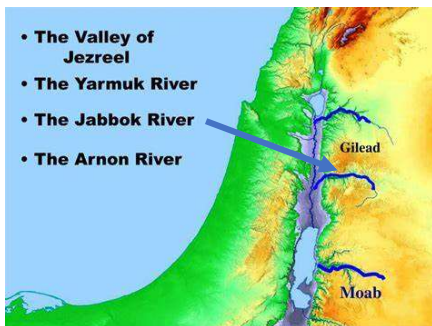
On route there, at probably one of the toughest times of his life, he has the vision of his Ladder – angels ascending and descending, and the Lord standing next to him. Genesis 28

'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; <sup>14</sup>and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east

and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. <sup>15</sup>Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’ <sup>16</sup>Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’ <sup>17</sup>And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’



He travels east – and ends up, over 14 years, getting married to two sisters, Leah and Rachel. It gets very complicated, very messy – difficult families are not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon – and the decades pass. Eventually, Jacob decides that he and his complicated family, his animals, his tribe, need to head back west – back to his family land, back to his brother, back to his ancestors, his real people. He knows God is sending him back, but he is still worried – petrified – about how he will be received, what sort of welcome he will get from Esau and that side of the family. There has been a family feud for decades, can it really be healed?



So Jacob and his tribe are back towards Canaan, close to meeting Esau and his tribe – he send his closest family on head, to cross the River Jabbok, it’s one of the stream that rises east of the Jordan and flows west into the river and down into the Dead Sea.



Then, while he is by himself, a man comes out of the darkness and wrestles with him. All night, and he only wins as the dawn comes by striking Jacob on the hip and throwing it out. “Let me go”, “bless me”, “give me your name”, “Jacob”<sup>7</sup>

‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’

I’m not sure anyone can really explain it – least of all Jacob himself – decades ago he saw a vision of angels, now he has wrestled with an angel, with God’s messenger, as close as any human can come. A night of struggle, a night of conflict, and he came through it.

He would go on to make his peace with his brother, to reject his foreign gods (and ensure his tribe did the same) – he would go on to be the dotting father of young man called Joseph, a son to whom he gave a multi-coloured coat. And we can sing the continuation of the story! As I say, sit and re-read the wonderful story of Jacob.

It’s a strange story, and I don’t know what to make of it. We all know times when it does feel as if we are struggling, and sometimes it feels as if we are wrestling with God. I have had several of my more evangelical friends reminding me that “God never tests you more than he knows you can cope with” – and I know they mean it well, but it is a doctrine I am not comfortable with.

I can manage the fight against being human – cancer is part of a world out of kilter with God, it is no one’s fault. God is not sitting up there making it grow inside me, it is just part of being human. I hope and pray that amazing medicine, backed up with positivity and prayer, will help me defeat it – but I will continue to be loved and held whether we can defeat it, or not. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

I want more energy to be put into the fight against human evil. Men, women and children are going hungry in our country, are dying in our country, because others are taking the resources, taking the wealth, refusing to help and support.

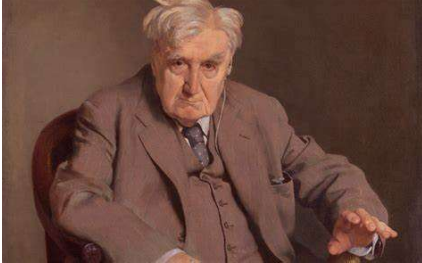


If you think I get angry, I will refer you to Nick Baines, the Bishop of Leeds, and the speech he gave on “Corruption in the UK” to the House of Lords Grand Committee earlier this week – you can read the full text at <https://nickbaines.wordpress.com/2022/10/13/corruption-in-the-uk/>  
The bishop talks about the corruption of politics, and asks

“why no ministerial ethics adviser? Why no anti-corruption tsar? Why still no real pinning down at a systemic level of cronyism, dodgy lobbying, unaccountable political donations that lead to personal reward? Why a laughing dismissal of hedge fund professionals who game a mini-budget and make millions out of the economic and social misery caused to the rest of the population? (No champagne parties for the losers.) Why do we tolerate a legal system that is being run down – as if justice does not require adequate funding and resourcing? Why a Ministerial Code that reduced moral accountability on the part of ministers? What just recompense for the public whose money was used to pay billions in contracts to government cronies during the covid pandemic?

All this is in plain sight. If we choose to ignore what is evident, we incur ethical judgment on our neglect. This is not incidental. If democracy and the rule of law are to mean anything, if integrity in public life is something to be honoured and not mocked, if public virtue is not to be shrunk into political or economic pragmatism or expediency, then this parliament must clean up its own act, pay attention to its use of language, show an example of transparent accountability in its vital work, and demonstrate the power of humility in setting a public culture.

There is so much evil to fight against, and this world will never be perfect. Sometimes it is not easy to know which evil we must fight today, and there must be more to life than an on-going battle. We are offered “life in all its fullness”, and we know that the battle against evil has been won.



I wanted to celebrate Ralph Vaughan Williams’ music today – and I will remind myself that we will still be singing his music, still be celebrating his God-given talent, still be worshipping God, when the politicians of last week, of this week, are simply a footnote in history. To God be the praise and the glory. Amen.

Peter Barham  
16 October 2022