

Year C, Trinity 18  
Genesis 32.22-31/Luke 18.1-8  
St. John's Carrington  
'Prayer'

Well, I know we had a pet blessing service a few weeks ago,  
But one thing I wasn't expecting to turn up was elephants.  
We've had two: there was one last week,  
And now there's one this week.

Last week, there was the elephant in the room in the passage from Luke  
where Jesus said 'your faith had made you well' – a reading that on the  
surface at least seemed to say if we have strong faith we'll be healed,

And then today's Gospel almost doubles down on that, the parable of the  
unjust judge and the persistent widow, which is very easy to read that if we  
keep praying, if we're persistent in our prayer, we will change God's mind.

Two lovely weeks for a preacher.

Somehow it's worked out that I've ended up preaching on both.  
But like last week, today's readings are actually far more nuanced and have  
something profound to teach us about the very need to pray, and the very  
purpose of prayer.

But I want to look first at Genesis which is that famous story of Jacob  
wrestling with God – or an angel of God – depending on the interpretation.

I adore this story.

I love this story firstly because it always reminds me that God does not  
choose the best, or the most ethical, or the most honourable.

Jacob was none of those things – he was a cheat, a liar,

Yet God called him.

And Right now, we find Jacob scared. Tomorrow, he will face his brother Esau  
– likely will fight him.

But before that, he has to wrestle with God.

There's this beautiful line in verse 30, when Jacob says 'I have seen God face  
to face.'

He names the place 'Peniel' – the face of God.

In Old Testament theology, to see the face of God, to gaze upon his glory, is to  
face death.

Exodus 33.20 when God warns Moses against seeing his face lest he should  
die,

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Or in Judges 6.22-23 when Gideon reacts in fear that having seen God's face he will die.

If you've ever seen Raiders of the Lost Ark, there's that really creepy scene at the end when the ark of the covenant is opened and all who gaze upon it die.

Yet Jacob does not die. In fact this reading shows that in wrestling with God, in seeing him face to face, Jacob is given a new purpose and above all a new identity.

Now you'll remember that Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright when he dressed as Esau in order to get their father Isaac's blessing.

There's something of a reversal here:

Whereas Isaac's blessing was won unfairly by cheating, here Jacob has to wrestle til daybreak to get God's.

It's almost like Jacob had to be wrestled out of the person he was before he could get this new identity.

This is a passage that the author Frederick Buechner describes it as 'the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.'

In many ways it feels like it encapsulates my own journey of faith:

I know God is there, I can look deeply into his eyes, but it often feels like I do so whilst trying to wrestle him to the ground, while trying to bring him to my level.

Except I don't call it wrestling,

I call it prayer.

As I've said before, the Greek word for prayer is proseuche,

A word that is very similar to the Greek word for worship –

A word from which we get the verb 'to prostrate.'

It reminds us that in both prayer and worship God remains central, he is the primary cause, the primary mover to which our attention is focused.

Why do we pray?

There are all sorts of answers and you would each bring something true to the discussion.

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And we've reflected much over the last few months when we had our sermon series on prayer.

But at its core, stripped back, prayer for me is about resting in God's company.

About finding solace in the one who loves us in the pain,

Who supports us in our grief.

And about being transformed by God's spirit.

Think of it like this: the more time we spend time with a loved one.

The more we take on their traits.

And I believe so too is prayer.

The well known spiritual writer Philip Yancey suggests that "prayer is about seeing things from God's perspective."

That can be a difficult concept, perhaps almost arrogant - how we can every truly know what God's perspective is,

And yet it is in prayer that, like Jacob, we grow into our God given identities,

In prayer our faith is sanctified and honed so that the eternal future of heaven breaks into our lives now, and so we are caught up in its inbreaking in the world.

To quote St. Augustine time spent in prayer is time, which "turns my heart towards God, when I am inclined no longer towards temporal things but towards God."

But that's difficult, and why the metaphor of wrestling is so helpful.

How many times in my own life have I brought something to God and have had to wrestle with him/

How many times have I tried to convince God of what I want only to be met with the still small voice of eternity saying to me 'you know what's right, what needs to be done.'

How many times, like Jacob, have I limped off with a bruised sense of pride and ego, and yet in some way have grown in my identity.

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I think that's why I so love this reading – so often in prayer do I sense God removing those charred edges, the prickliness of my self-centredness and arrogance.

So often though do I find myself resisting – wrestling God with the certainty of my own superiority only to walk away knowing what it truly means to be a beloved adopted child of God.

And as I walk away, I have grown in that identity

Grown in that need to live that identity in this world,

And I have grown in my faith in the God of love and justice

And here I think we find one of many possible interpretations of the Gospel reading.

Firstly, we shouldn't see the judge in this reading as God:

The judge in the Gospel is unjust, whereas God is a God of justice.

On one level, this is a reading that compels us, as we wait for Jesus' return, to be persistent in our own pursuit of God's justice,

The justice of the Kingdom that overturns the justice of the world.

And nor should we believe that this reading isn't setting out to address whether we can change God's mind (that's a whole other theological issue for another time),

But rather I think when we pair it with this story of Jacob, we find something else about prayer.

Jesus is calling us to be persistent in prayer,

Because it is in prayer that we draw close to God,

Just like Jacob sees God's face in the wrestling

So too do we see the loving and just face of Jesus in the wrestling of our own prayer lives.

And just as Jacob leaves with a new purpose,

So too are we reminded and strengthened in our new purpose,

Our new identities as baptized Christians,

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And like last week, where a life of thankfulness brings God's saving love into the here and now,

So too does prayer. In prayer we see the face of Jesus,

And in prayer we see his love.

And in seeing, knowing and growing in his love, we find sure and certain hope.

The surety of a life transformed and the certainty of a world redeemed.

That for me at least is worth being persistent.

Amen.

Rev James Pacey