

Do you ever have the nagging feeling that someone out there is trying to tell you something? I haven't preached much this summer, as a result of being away quite a lot and having a new colleague on the team. But when I have, the theme seems always to have been the same. The readings and the contexts have been different, but there has been a persistent thread running through them all. Here we are again, and the three readings we've just heard all again illustrate the determination, the struggle and the persistence necessary to live a Christian life.

The excerpt from the Letter to Timothy, our second reading, is quite explicit. It doesn't matter whether Paul actually wrote it, or whether it was sent to the 'real' Timothy. But it is absolutely clear. Hang in there. Keep hold of the scriptures. Carry on preaching. Teach patiently. Deliver a consistent message. Drag people back to the truth when they are seduced by other easier, more comfortable lifestyles. Make sure that the way you live reflects of the message you preach. Most importantly, don't give up. Be persistent.

The Gospel reading is sometimes called the Parable of the Unjust Judge, which is slightly unfair to the judge. There is no suggestion that he can be bribed to decide a case one way rather than another. Nor is he one of those jobsworth officials who enjoy throwing their weight around to demonstrate their own importance. This one has no respect for anyone. He simply can't be bothered. But because the widow does bother him, over and over again, he eventually decides that it is all just too irritating, hears her case and gives her the ruling she has asked for. The widow is rewarded for her persistence. So, by analogy, God will quickly grant justice to his people who persist in prayer to him. Of course God already knows what we need, but repeated prayer brings us to understand the depths of our need and the generosity of his response.

Jacob, too, was persistent. This story, of a night-time encounter with a mysterious being at a river-crossing, is a fascinating mix of a very ancient type of myth involving spirits of place, night demons and magical powers which fade at daybreak, overlaid by part of the earliest history of God's people, the children of Israel. Jacob was not a blameless character. He first deceived his father Isaac into giving him the inheritance which should have gone to his very-slightly-older twin brother. The old Biblical account of that event includes the wonderful sentence: 'Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, but I am a smooth man'. Later the smooth Jacob adopted some very strange breeding techniques to increase the size of his flocks at his father-in-law's expense, and then fled with his flocks, herds and entire household when father-in-law became suspicious. Now he was on his way to meet Esau for the first time since their father's death, and he had been told that Esau, who had originally vowed to kill him to regain his inheritance, was coming to the meeting with four hundred men. He was, quite naturally, worried.

So Jacob, alone at the river crossing, wrestled all night with a man about whom we know nothing, except that he obviously wasn't a fellow-traveller or a local bandit. At dawn, when the man asked to be released, Jacob refused unless the man gave him a blessing. This was the

second blessing he had asked for, the first being the inheritance from his father. This time he received a new name – a very significant event in early society – and the assurance that he was in good standing with God. But the man would not give his own name, and Jacob was convinced that he had seen God and survived. This was literally a ‘dark night of the soul’. Jacob was struggling with the implications of his own behaviour. When dawn broke, he went on to the meeting with his brother, which turned out to be one of humility, forgiveness and reconciliation.

All this dogged determination may sound rather dispiriting when we are about to welcome a brand-new member of the Christian family. Is this what we are letting William in for? It seems a terrible burden to load onto anyone, particularly at this early stage of his life. Well, yes – and no. No, because as St Paul does definitely tell us, the rewards of belief and faithful discipleship are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are not burdens but blessings, the marks of a fulfilled and God-filled life. But persistence is also required. Baptism isn’t just a happy event on a Sunday morning. It is the beginning of an enterprise which involves many people: parents, godparents, William’s family and friends, his teachers, us here at St Peter’s and other Christians he will meet along the way. We’ll all have to be persistent in answering his questions, telling him about Jesus, finding ways in which he can come with us to church and play football, and explaining why some ideas and actions are good while others are harmful. We’ll need to persist for ourselves as well, battering on God’s heart with prayers when things are difficult, struggling with our own consciences about our own behaviour, and trying to be the examples of decent behaviour that we want William to emulate.

It’s a tough call, but we have God’s help and each other’s encouragement, and we owe it to young William to see it through.