

Sermon for Trinity 18 Sunday 20th October 2019

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Do the names Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks mean anything to you? Now, if you do recognise these names it dates you as it does me to a time in the 1970s when these characters spent their time on our TV screens preening, grimacing, parading and throwing each other onto the canvas. Big Daddy aka Shirley Crabtree and Giant Haystacks aka Martin Ruane were professional wrestlers. Their matches were often more pantomime than Graeco- Roman in style, but strangely compelling.

Listening to our Old Testament reading this morning I hope you will see why my mind took me on this walk down memory lane. For we heard the account of Jacob, father of the Children of Israel in a wrestling match. Who he was wrestling, we shall return to shortly. But let's start with Jacob. His story takes up many chapters in the Book of Genesis and the later part of his life is very familiar from our own learned reading or soundtrack of "Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat." But this is about a younger Jacob, and Jacob, as we might say now, has form as far as wrestling is concerned. His life has been full of wranglings from his conception. We learn that he was called Jacob meaning "I supplant" or "I push out of the way" because when he was born he had his hand grasping his twin brother Esau's heel. Esau, the elder by a matter of minutes, literally has his younger brother hot on his heels from the very beginning. Earlier still, their mother Rebecca complains that the "children struggled together within her." Jacob later tricks his brother Esau out of his birthright with a feint worthy of Shirley and Martin. He pretends to his blind father Isaac that he is Esau and receives his father's blessing instead of him.

Jacob runs away from and soon gets into a fight, figuratively speaking, with Laban the father of Rachel, the girl he falls in love with. This time it is Jacob against the ropes, as Laban tricks him into marrying his elder daughter Leah first. Years go by, children are born. Life goes on for Jacob with occasional skirmishes and visions of angels until we reach our passage today.

Because of an agreement with Laban, Jacob must return to his homeland, the land of Canaan. To do so he must pass through the land of Edom. The trouble is the land of Edom is the land of Esau. The supplanted one, the cheated one, the one pushed out of the way. This time Jacob does not want to trick his brother but to be reconciled to him.

Jacob hears from messengers that Esau is approaching with 400 men. What to do? Jacob sends ahead presents for Esau, but what can you give to someone you have deprived of so much. Finally the night before the meeting with Esau, Jacob sends his family and goods ahead of him and is left alone.

The writer of Genesis tells us starkly with no preamble: "Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until day-break".

We are not told who he is or where he comes from but from the end of the account it is clear to Jacob that he has been wrestling and has been touched by God Himself.

As you will imagine from such a strange and compelling story much ink has been spilt on this passage. It has been suggested that this is a psycho-drama. That all the wrestling is happening in Jacob's guilty and troubled head. The sense of all he has done to Esau, all he fears Esau will do in retribution. The fear of all the next day will hold.

This is a helpful interpretation but very different to what we are actually told, for this, with the dislocation of Jacob's hip, is a very physical fight. It does not exclude the, inner turmoil that Jacob is experiencing..

If Jacob senses with whom he is wrestling we might ask what doesn't he let go when the man ask him to –“for the day is breaking”. The day that is breaking is the day Jacob fears and hence his answer. “I will not let you go until you bless me.”For all this new dawn brings forgive me, help me, bless me.

I will not let you go until you bless me. And as Jacob is blessed he knows with whom he has fought. For Jacob says at the end: For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved. Jacob is blessed indeed.

Wrestling and blessing. The parable we heard in our Gospel today is also a strange story. Even Luke prefaces it with an explanation of what Jesus means by it. Not Luke's usual practice. We learn that Jesus tells this story about our need to pray and to not lose heart. The widow in the parable is also a wrestler. She is wrestling with an unjust judge and legal system that will not hear her plea. The unjust judge has no compassion or interest in the widow and her case but in the end gives in to get her to stop. What is Jesus's point? Is it a wrestling match to get God to hear us?

No. Jesus's point is the opposite. If even bad human judges can be prepared to listen then how much more ready to meet us in our every need is our loving Father God? Like, Jacob, overwhelmed by the sense of all we have done. The fear of all the next day will hold.

We can make heavy weather of our prayer lives. Tangling it up with a sense of needing the right words or context or place. Tangling it up with a sense of onerous duty or chore rather than the lifting of our burdens, a touch of God's blessing. In the Gospel Jesus tells us we are banging at an open door. We have a God who wants to hear our sorrows and our sorries, our fears and our regrets, our heartaches- to forgive our foolish ways. For the wrestling is more often with ourselves and our relationships and into these God wants to come not to fight us but to bless us. Like Jacob.

For let us go back to Jacob. Whenever this reading is set I always wish it would continue to the next chapter and Jacob's next day.

Remember Jacob is about to meet Esau with his 400 men. The first time since Jacob's treachery. Well, this is what happens: Genesis 34: Jacob went ahead bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.”

The arms around Jacob are fighting for him not against him: to bring him to his knees, to tears, and to peace. And those same arms are around us as we come to God in prayer – a God who is not our opponent but in our corner. *Amen*