

## A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

**Wrestling** Proper 24C 20<sup>th</sup> October 2019,  
8 am Linton, 10 am Horseheath

**Genesis 32.22-31**

**Luke 18.1-8**

A commentator wrote this about our first reading: *‘There is no more strange and perplexing narrative than this in the whole of the Old Testament’*. (Robert Davidson, Genesis 12-50, Cambridge Bible Commentary, 1979, p.184). *‘The boldness and language, and the symbolism of the story is startling. It is not recounted as a dream or vision, but as an incident which happened one night. Jacob wrestled with an unidentified ‘man’ who turned out to be God, wrestled and lived to tell the tale.’*

Maybe it’s because it is perplexing and strange, and not in spite of these features, that this story has caught people’s imaginations, and helped them to think about their own relationship with God. Painting by Adam Boulter, Charles Wesley’s hymn.

*Come, O thou traveller unknown  
Whom still I hold but cannot see.  
My company before is gone  
And I am left alone with thee;  
with thee all night I mean to stay  
and wrestle till the break of day.*

Many people have the experience of wrestling in the dark, either in sleepless nights, or simply in the fact of wrestling with something in your innermost, hidden self – hidden from everyone else’s eyes and awareness. We may not always feel it’s God we’re wrestling with. Often enough, it may be ourselves we wrestle with. But more of this later.

But let’s turn to the biblical context of Jacob’s story. Genesis sets this event in the night before he met his brother Esau – the one he’d betrayed and tricked; the one he’d fled from so many years ago. He had no idea of what Esau’s reaction might be when they met. Was Jacob then, wrestling with fear? Or with his conscience? Genesis leaves the psychological guesswork to us, simply letting us know that Jacob was in a sense wrestling with God.

When we wrestle in the dark, whether in sleeplessness, or in the secret recesses of our souls, who or what do we feel were wrestling with? Is it worry and anxiety, or a dilemma we cannot solve? Something we can’t understand or a question we can’t answer? Do we wrestle with our consciences or with some aspect of ourselves that we would rather not acknowledge, but which holds us captive all the same – a compulsion, an addiction a resentment or a weakness? Is it a clouding of our mental map that we struggle against – a mental illness which we’re trying to hide? Maybe we wrestle with a burden which we feel that we’ve carried too long – a relationship, a person, an illness or some insoluble

situation. We wrestle because feelings arise which we don't like to admit to – perhaps wishing the burdensome person in our lives away, or wanting to rage about the pain and weariness of what we have to carry, even though another part tells us that 'other people have it worse. We should learn to accept our pains, our griefs'. So much of our wrestling can be captured by the description 'conflicting emotions'. We don't know what to feel, or how to control what we *do* feel. In many people's experience, conflicting emotions are a great battleground, and a trigger for all kinds of physical as well as psychological pain.

But, as I've said, the Bible isn't just talking about conflicting emotions: it's talking about wrestling with God. And here we have to recognise that if we're Christians, our mental conflicts do almost inevitably have a dimension which may make us feel we're wrestling with the Almighty. Try to pray, for example, about something you're wrestling with, and you may well find that you don't know how to pray. Should you express thoughts of absolute trust, or more honest words of rage and rancour? Should you come to God humbly in confession for your unacceptable feelings, or in a cry of challenge - '*How long, O Lord, how long?*' What is the right kind of prayer? What prayer will find its mark? We may feel cut off and powerless to approach God as we feel we should.

Jacob wrestled all night. There was no easy resolution for him. Our attempts at prayer may bring no easy resolution, either. We may feel we're battering away at a God who doesn't disperse our darkness or take away our inner pain.

Jacob wrestled all night, but he didn't let go. The battle increased his anguish and brought new pain; he would limp for the rest of his life. But he *demand*ed a blessing – no less – before he would rest.

Think of some others who have wrestled in the dark with God: St Paul, for example, who three times begged for release from the '*thorn in his flesh*' (whatever it was) from which he suffered. In the end, blessing came to him, but only in the knowledge that he would have to go on carrying it, and yet with God's enigmatic promise, '*my strength is made perfect in weakness;*' (2 Corinthians 12.9). Like Jacob, he was left limping.

Or think of our Lord, himself, wrestling with God in Gethsemane, praying earnestly that the coup of suffering would pass from him, and yet saying '*yet not what I want, but what you want...*' (Matt.26.39); wrestling until his drops of sweat fell like blood on the ground (Luke 22.44). Did the darkness lift for him? Maybe momentarily, as he gained the assurance that he was fulfilling the Scriptures and his Father's will (Matt. 26.56); and yet the darkness fell again, at least the next

day – darkness covering the whole land as he cried out ‘*My God. why have you forsaken me?*’ (Matt. 27.45,46).

It may be for us, as even for him, that only beyond the horizon of resurrection will resolution come. Till then, we may still wrestle –with ourselves and with God.

In the story of Jacob, something did change through his night-time experience: he felt he had glimpsed God, for he called the place ‘Peniel (or Penuel)’ which means ‘the face of God’. And when, on the next morning, he finally encountered Esau, and found in him not rejection but someone who ran to embrace him, he said to him ‘*truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God*’ (Gen 33.10). A moment of peace and reconciliation then, brought about at least partly because of the night battle Jacob had been through. Yet, even after this, the curtain came down again; despite Esau’s invitation, Jacob didn’t go on to live near him in harmonious brotherhood; he chose to take himself somewhere else, and the Bible goes on to tell us that the Edomites – who were, Genesis says, the descendants of Esau – and the Israelites, Jacob’s race – were often in bitter conflict. Even today, we might say, the children of Israel are still wrestling, without having moved into reconciliation with their near neighbours.

If this seems like a gloomy observation about how long-lived wrestling can be - through our lives until we reach the horizon of Resurrection – I think it has a certain

realism, and illuminates Jesus’ question, ‘*when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?*’ (Luke 18.8). Faith translates into faithfulness – persistence – not letting go, even if life seems an unending struggle and faith can feel at times like a fight.

Of course, sometimes a deep and even swift resolution *is* experienced in this life. People find healing and reconciliation with God, their situation and themselves. Sometimes positive miracles do happen, and the day does break definitively in response to faithful prayer which doesn’t let go. But in other cases, people do feel that they go on struggling to the end of their lives.

But the blessing does come in the very fact of not letting go – in not giving up, not brushing to one side the things or people we wrestle with as though they didn’t matter.

Hanging on to God, however incoherent and unknowing our prayers may feel, does yield its fruit – maybe in learning, like St Paul, that God’s strength is mysteriously at work in and through our weakness. We too, like Jacob, may sense that we have glimpsed the face of God in our struggles, and hang on to the faith that one day we will see it again – and this time, perfectly – not through the cloudiness of the crazed and brittle mirror of our lives as we now know them, but in the full light of our Father’s house.