

'He [Jacob] strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favour' (Hosea 12:4)

Why is it at the very time when one tries to forget the worries of the day that at night-time these worries grow larger than life, and try as we might to forget them, they keep us tossing and turning? Of course, you can say to yourself, 'These worries can wait until morning, and then I'll deal with them sensibly.' But does the mind listen? No it does not, if anything it inflates them to silly proportions.

My worries often translate into alarming dreams. They usually involve a class who are a bit more challenging than the others. Suddenly in the dream – which is very real – the class has turned into a riot, my voice has diminished to a feeble squeak and try as I might, there is nothing I can do to control them.

In the morning things are different and I can sort out what needs to be done, and you'll be glad to know, the naughty class - when I do actually see them, behave themselves.

Our worries and fears are part of life. Learning to deal with them is hard work and for some people it is a very great strain. Having a church community, friends, family and supportive colleagues makes a great deal of difference as to how we deal with these inner demons.

So, it might be surprising to learn that in struggling with these inner worries or demons, we might also in some way be encountering God.

This is not my idea; it is a biblical theme. Let me explain through the OT story of Jacob.

Jacob, a successful tribal leader, with his wives, children, servants and great wealth is nevertheless a worried man. To everyone who knows him he is a hero – he moved the great stone from the top of the well to impress Rachel (his future wife), when it usually required several men to do this; at Bethel God revealed himself in the dream of a ladder to heaven. But since the time when he cunningly stole the birth-right from Esau he has lacked the courage to make his peace with him.

It is night-time. He has sent his family on and for some reason he has returned to the deep gorge of Jabbok where the waters pass furiously between the rocks. As he attempts to cross he is confronted by a powerful stranger and they wrestle all night until day-break.

Who is this stranger? One suggestion is that it is a water demon whose mighty power is derived from the torrent of water from Jabbok. On one level this is just another story of our hero Jacob showing off his strength – just as did at the well. But, there is more to the stranger than this.

At another level the demon, is Jacob's conscience, his deep-seated worries. It is night-time and the following day he will encounter Esau when he fears the meeting will be hostile. The

struggle with the water demon is therefore his deep-seated anxiety of what he knows he needs to do: that is to meet his brother and confess his faults.

So it is at day-break that Jacob resolves his fears. By asking for the stranger's blessing he gains the inner power he needs to face up to Esau and seek reconciliation.

But there is yet another dimension to the story. It is the oddest one of all and one which I imagine a later writer has added as he reflected on Jacob's inner struggle and it is this: in struggling with his conscience Jacob has also encountered God.

Many Christians believe that our moral conscience is in some way connected to God. Some describe it as the 'voice of God', some as the inner aspect of oneself which is in conversation with God through prayer, reflection and meditation. For me the experience of God is often as 'loud thoughts', unexpected and occurring at the least likely moments.

So, Jacob's struggle with the stranger is at the same time his confrontation with his inner demons, his awakening conscience and awareness of God. That is why the stranger refuses to give his name to Jacob. For the man is not a singular person but all these things - besides which God cannot be reduced to a single name.

By contrast Jacob acquires a new name – Israel, 'one who has struggled with God', and he in turn names the place, Peniel, 'God's face'. The names represent two sides of the same experience.

What makes Jacob's encounter at Jabbok so memorable is, as many biblical scholars have commented, that no other story is quite so strange or perplexing in the OT as this one. I love the way that over time it has gained multiple layers of meaning as each writer has added to it.

Now it is your turn: reflect on Jacob's struggle during the night at the swirling waters at Jabbok, add your own thoughts which you struggle with and perhaps through these you might also encounter God's presence and gain strength from it.