

Sermon 3 August 2014  
Genesis 32:22-31 Matthew 14:13-21 'Wrestling with God'

*Prayer: God, when we are hungry, feed us with bread and fish for the journey. When we struggle, sustain us with words of wisdom and stories of hope. When we wrestle with the unknown, touch us with companionship and love. Amen.*

For the first time ever a NZ woman won a medal at the Commonwealth Games in Wrestling – Tayla Ford won a bronze for herself – for us. Even in this picture we can see that wrestling is a very physical – hands on, sport! But not all of our wrestling is hands – on, sometimes, as we all know we have to wrestle with ideas, with ideals, with ethics, with theology, morals, emotions, decisions..... It's never 'clean', rarely clear cut – **simply because** if it was clear – we'd not be wrestling!

And wrestling is what our hero/ anti-hero Jacob is doing. But in writing this *I* wrestled with the fact that in the past couple of weeks I have been preaching with the positive spin on Jacob's story. I've called him a rogue, *twisted*, but today the **fact is** he stole his brothers birthright, then with his mother's connivance lied to his blind father stealing his brothers blessings and inheritance **and then, again** with his mother help fled to her brother (for protection?) because his, Esau brother was looking to kill him.

Jacob arrived, met up with his uncle Laban, fell in love with Laban's younger daughter Rachel, was deceived by his uncle into working for 14 years as a bride price for Rachel – then cleverly conned his father-in-law out of sheep / goats etc so that he, Jacob became very, very rich... and **had to leave** because Laban's sons were chasing him – and as they left, Rachel stole her fathers 'domestic' gods/ idols... I tell you this family has their share scandals! cV

**So** with our readings today Jacob – I have warned you right? Jacob is on his way home, at least 20 years later but possibly more, he has changed and wants his family but he has no idea about how his family will receive him. Remember Esau? His brother from whom he stole **everything**, before he ran 650 kms away to his mother's brother, officially to 'look for a bride', has Esau changed? cV

And now that Jacob **and** his enormous flocks **and** servants **and** 11 children **and** 4 wives **and** *all that*, **and now** that they are close to the lands of 'Abraham's family' Jacob activates 'Plan A'. He sends everyone and everything else ahead, into his brother's path, and he hangs back over night!!!! Cv

Jacob **is** by him-self by the brook of Jabbok – JaKob – both can mean twisted in Hebrew! And **God** comes to wrestle with him - personally. **The** grace captured in this moment is priceless. Cv

How can we, who so twist our lives out of shape with the things we do, the thoughts we have, the passions that overcome us, the desires of our hearts that fights God's – all the wrestling we do with good and bad, love and hate, pride and humility... *all this in this story* says **God will find** us alone and engage us personally in a one on one – even fight! The Creator of the Universe will fight for our soul, **our future** – face to face, hand to hand– **this** is a gift of grace. Cv

**And** having wrestled with God- the things of God, Jacob is forever changed. Not *only* physically – with the 'limp' but also in name, Israel is born. Israel which means 'God is reliable' begins life as the new day dawns. True to most life experiences with the Divine – it's not instant remission of all of his 'rogue characteristics, but he is a changed man – he has *again* been blessed by God. Face to face and he lived! \* **Wounded and blessed** because God entered his life, which is always the case when we are touched by God in our broken world. Cv

Stories like Jacobs are important for us to keep a balance in our 'God-thinking'. All too often we turn to the Lord for comfort and strength and for a Divine touch – for blessings, for all the positive and good things – carefully leaving to one side the things that would bring balance – like the wounded-ness

which also belongs to God's people's experience of God's touch, the limping that may be a consequence of wrestling with the things of the faith, because new beginnings are not necessarily made in / from a perfect 'state' or being! Cv

The question is – <sup>\*1</sup> what kind of God do we want and what kind of God **do we need**? There is a difference highlighted in today's Bible texts. The kind Jacob / Israel tells us about is one who meets us face to face and wrestles with the issues that concern, upset, challenge, worry... us – even when we are rat-bags! <sup>\*2</sup> The kind of God who gets into a night-time brawl with us, 'mortals' and comes out no better than even! What kind of God do we want? What do we need? CV

What we have is a God completely **at home** wrestling with us; challenging us, allowing us to be truly ourselves and calling for more – better – a new start – from deep within. A comforting, miracle making Lord who does everything for us might be *what we want* – but what we need to be truly human, is a Lord who meets us right in our moment of truth and says – 'feed them yourselves'. cV

Jesus **reply** to the disciples when they were moaning about having to feed so many people – so far from the shops and supplies... *Jesus basically said*: 'Feed them yourselves'. The disciples replied – how? 'We don't have enough'. Is it uncharitable to 're-phrase' this as 'we don't / won't share?' Some of my background readings really offered a challenge by questioning how we, as **such a wealthy world** have such poverty and starvation. Cv

**Are we** as a people of God **prepared to wrestle** with what 'Talking Sense' puts up for discussion each month for us? – (You'll find it on the column in the foyer.) Or to **wrestle** with the need to recognise the challenge implicit in the fact that we **are** actually producing enough food to feed the world. <sup>\*</sup> Barbara Kingslayer says 'current food production can sustain world food needs even for the 8 billion people who are projected to inhabit the planet in 2030! <sup>\*3</sup> The problem is not with the food, it is with people not having money or opportunity to get the food they need.'

This story of the feeding is a **prophetic word** challenging us to work for ways to provide for the needs of everyone. This may mean working against unfair farming subsidies, or unjust trade laws, or it may mean ensuring that the way we buy and use our food is supportive of just practices. These are complex issues, but eating simply, minimising waste and buying from producers and distributors that pay a fair wage and engage in just practices is a relatively easy first step.

**But this step** *just like Jacobs* – will hurt and make us limp – right? So do we do it or not? Is this not a theological wrestling with **what it is** to be the people of God and followers of Jesus "way"? Blessed because we are his people – but wounded because we have begun to do as Jesus challenged us with his 'you feed them'! cv

You see miracles, Jesus miracles can let us off the hook <sup>\*4</sup> they have a tendency to "mesmerise" us and lead us to leave everything up to God. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, and do it all." But today Jesus said – you do it, they began / they tried – and then he blessed with words and in actions that echo our Communion sharing.

If God meeting Jacob face to face was a grace-moment, then Jesus accepting the disciples meagre offering and multiplying it in the way he did: however he did: '**miracle**' *that it was*, that too is a moment of grace. I *want to ask* if it was an accident that the 'miracle' came **after** the person to person work of asking – talking – searching – through the enormous crowd; if it came after the sheer, hard work on behalf of the disciples, and then Jesus could bless their discovery, their work.

Let me offer a theological challenge: what kind of God do you want? One who allows plan 'A', let everyone else face it first? Plan 'B': let Jesus produce a miracle? Or God in Christ's plan: you do it and I'll wrestle with you face to face until with blessings and wounding's we welcome a new day. Amen

<sup>\*</sup> JVandeLaar, <sup>\*1</sup> K Matthews- Huey <sup>\*2</sup>Richard Pervo <sup>\*3</sup>[See Animal, Vegetable, Mineral p.18]) <sup>\*4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor (*The Seeds of Heaven*)