

Wrestling with the angel

Genesis 12:23-33

I was recently asked the name of my favourite biblical character.

I should say at the outset, that I don't think you can answer "Jesus" to that question, because of course that's right answer, and I think the question is really shorthand for "Apart from Jesus, who is your favourite biblical character?"

And I surprised myself how quickly I answered. Normally with favourites, the question that comes to my head is how to choose.... Normally I am paralysed because I don't want to relegate someone to second favourite or third favourite. I want everyone to win a gold medal.

But I was surprised at the quickness of my response

And of some of the characters I passed over to make it...

I didn't answer Paul

Which is surprising....

When I actually want to model ministry on Paul (if anyone here is surprised by this, it's because Paul has often been misrepresented – he was a sharp radical)

If I wanted a picture of committed humanity I would choose Mary the mother of Jesus, and if I wanted emotional intimacy I would choose Mary of Bethany

If I wanted emotional range I would choose David of the psalms

And I love the beloved disciple in the fourth gospel...

But ahead of all of these went Jacob.

I think it's because he says you can be human and be a person of faith at the same time. I think that's why I like him.

It's not like faith is about saying the right words,
Or learning a way of being polite and respectable
Or even ultimately being sufficiently theologically orthodox.
It's about a wholehearted commitment to the path before you
Living your full humanity,
And embracing the Godness of this life....

I love Jacob because he holds onto this,
And embodies this in his mistakes...

That he tells me there is something truthful and raw and human and vulnerable and incomplete and having countless blind spots, about being a person of faith.

I do really love him.

There are three stories I probably like the most about Jacob.

The first is the story of him in his early life
Running away from his brother and family
After cheating him of his birthright
sleeping on a stone,
And seeing a vision of angels ascending and descending
And naming this place Bethel....
I love that he has a vision of God,
That he blessed and met by God,
In his wretchedness, his unqualifiedness,
And he names it, says this is it here
This is the house of God.

And ever since then I have had a penchant for naming the presence of God in unexpected places... at ceilidhs, or in bottles of whisky, or on the hills above Weem, or sweltering unlovely heat of an Indian harbour.

I love the story of the end of his later-life, when he is gathered in Egypt with his sons,
And sees what the future will be for them.

But the story which I absolutely love about Jacob, is this story here....

It belongs to Jacob's mid-life....
He has been successful in his career of farming
His family – though riven with strife – is not short of children
But there remains one open, gaping sore in his life,
Which is his relationship with his twin brother Esau, the one from whom he stole the birthright all those decades ago.

And then the pattern has kind of repeated itself...

After Jacob's first attempt at family life has gone wrong
So has his second attempt

Jacob's second attempt at family life has gone wrong, not through a sudden incident, but through years and years of suspicion...and because his father-in-law is a bigger swindler than Jacob - isn't that so often the case that our biggest conflicts are with those who are like us....

Unlike with the conflict with Esau all those years ago, the conflict with Laban is resolved, and Jacob and Laban leave each other in peace..

But now Jacob must face the biggest conflict of his human life, with his twin, Esau...

And this pain is like the pain of the Das Brothers, falling out over Puma and Adidas
Or the Lidl brothers,
Or when I do a funeral visit, and I discover that there is a family member that is cut off
And it doesn't feel like there is a way back...

Or people will have tried once or twice, but it just made things worse...

He deliberately heads towards the country where Esau is – this move is fraught with
courage, and terror and risk
And it's the reason I love Jacob...

, and he sends messengers ahead, they simply announce Jacob's arrival, but they come back
with a message that Esau is approaching with 400 men.

What do you do when you hear that message, that your estranged brother is reappearing
with 400 men, you assume the worst, you assume that this is a company of soldiers, you
believe that this is your comeuppance, you believe that this is what you deserve.

Jacob the strategist has two ways of dealing with this – the first is to divide the company in
two, and the second is to send ahead gifts.

Good tactics... but its not enough, and its not what is required.

Because here is the discovery... that Jacob now must not confront the conflict that has just
passed with Laban,

Or the ancient primal conflict he has with his twin brother Esau

The wrestling match he must now have is with a mystery opponent, like so many great
wrestlers, their true identity is masked and hidden and unknown.

The way the story is told, it comes suddenly, and it is full of confusion,
As if in the darkness of night, and entanglement of bodies you cannot tell what is
happening.

Here is how it reads literally in the Hebrew...

Jacob his two wives, his two maidservants, his eleven children and he made them cross the
crossing at the Jabbok.

And he took them, and he made them cross the stream with every single thing that was to
his name...

But Jacob remained..

Separated

And a man wrestled with him until the rising of the dawn.

And he saw that he did not overcome him
He struck the socket of his hip and dislocated the socket of the hip of Jacob
When wrestling with him.

And he said to him release me, for dawn had risen
And he said "I won't release you until you bless me."

--- this is what I love about Jacob – I won't let go, in this tangle of bodies, his hip dislocated,
him in screaming agony – for all this struggle I am going to get a blessing out of this.

And he said to him, "What is your name?" and he said to him "Jacob"

And he said "not Jacob", he said "now your name is Israel for you struggled with God and
with men and you won."

--- this is odd, that he is proclaimed the winner
--- and it is odd that he is not named after the win, but after the struggle.

And Jacob answered and he said "Let me know, what is your name?"
And he said "Why do you ask this? My name?"

And he blessed him there.

And Jacob called the name of the place "Face of God", for I have seen God face to face and
my soul was delivered."

What does this twisting, twirling, hurling, burling, confusing, exhausting, all night story say...

It says that if you have conflict, if you are wrestling with something
Even if that something is someone else's doing
Even if you have hurt, or if you have been hurt
Then the primary person for you to wrestle with is God.

We have to go there with God,
And we have to argue with God..
Or wrestle.

Somehow in wrestling with God, we are also wrestling with humans
The key thing is to give yourself to the struggle.

You wrestle and fight, and hold on,
Hold on to be blessed,
Hold on to be blessed even if you are sore and wounded
Wrestle with God.

This is an end to anaemic slightly pathetic spirituality
This is the spirituality of the slam, the half nelson, the twist, it is getting close

It is getting covered in dust.

There is something very interesting in parenting books, raising boys, It tells us that in all cultures men and boys wrestle – uncles, nephews, fathers sons – and what is interesting about these contests is that there is a complete mismatch of strength – the object of the context is not to win, it is to struggle – it is about discovering strength, and fear, and something bigger than you, it is getting hurt, it is about contact, it is about love. You cannot hug each other for half an hour, but you can wrestle. And something about this brings about maturity and respect.

In his bestselling book, Raising Boys, Steve Biddulph says that the thing to say to a boy before a wrestle is not, “Can you stick to the rules?” but “Can you handle it?”

And this is a life about God beyond rules, and God coming at us, and saying can you handle it.

And in this the boy learns to go into conflict even with something much bigger than himself, to risk being wounded, and to know when to stop – that you can still go into conflict and feel safe.

That this is essential for learning – what is interesting to me that Jacob has to do this in midlife – because some of his biggest trials are ahead of him, and they have nothing to do with Esau.

They have the trial of staying hopeful when his sons are in Egypt, it is in staying hopeful that the promises that God has given to him, can be promises which hold.

Wrestling with the powers

I think this points us to the next most famous wrestler in the Bible,
And this may surprise you,
But this is the Apostle Paul.

In the letter to the Ephesians,
Paul writes that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood
But against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers over this present darkness.

There are powers in this world.

The scholar most associated with this is a man called Walter Wink, a New Testament scholar who studied the words for powers and authorities and noticed that sometimes they referred to an earthly power, and sometimes to a spiritual powers, and sometimes to both.

There are powers in the world with which we must wrestle.

In Glasgow, there is a thing called the Glasgow effect – an effect whereby Glasgow has far worse outcomes for heart disease, mental health, domestic violence than equivalent cities such as Liverpool or Manchester or Newcastle. And in her book on this, Carol Craig, argues in terms which become spiritual that these are the Glaswegian love of bling and showing off wealth, regardless of who has to be crushed to get to that – and she traces this from the tobacco lords to the sugar barons to the present day.

I do often wonder in 121 George Street that the same political fights and strife exist today and keep repeating themselves over generation after generation – spiritual and earthly power

Or the continued attraction that Europe has for fascism and nationalism

Or the attraction we have had for Empire but not for responsibility

Or the Scottish chip on the shoulder which both means we look to exploit others, but are afraid to see the joy of the world.

These are all spiritual powers

And Paul says we are to wrestle against them – not flesh and blood,
But the powers.

[This points to Jesus](#)

And the final thing I want to say is that whenever a man appears in the guise of God in the scriptures, we have to think about Jesus, who is the presence of God in human form.

We do not often think of Jesus as a wrestler,
But I think that this might work for someone who knew his strength
Who battled against demons and against the waves and against false religion and ultimately confronted the pretensions of the Roman Empire

He wrestled

And he wrestled against the disciples, their lack of faith, their lack of trust in God, their lack of belief that God might use them, the way that they had internalised the worst that the world said about them, and he took them to places where again and again they were defeated and also grown.

And I think that is an anaemic view of discipleship, that views it as rule following, or doing the right thing, discipleship means wrestling, and I urge you, to give yourself to that contest, that it looks like wrestling, then you may well be wrestling with God – in fact when do we not wrestle when we are a disciple.

And I think of him two wrestling on the cross, defeating the principalities and powers of this world, all that is dark is defeated, the devil and the demons and all that would give power to

the worst of this world – they are defeated. Even in the worst in us. So I urge you to trust him, to put your faith in him.

And I think of that moment at the end,
Where Jacob is known for the struggle - he is renamed
He is blessed
And he is wounded

Those three go together in discipleship – be named, be blessed, be wounded
In Jesus Christ

AMEN