

Welcome

As I read the Bible, I never fail to be amazed at the kind of people God chooses to use. Few of them are perfect, most are flawed and some you wouldn't put in charge of even the simplest task.

Jacob is a case in point – a cheat, a swindler, a coward – hardly nation building material. And yet God uses him as indeed he uses so many other broken people.

Today we are going to be thinking about an incident in Jacob's life. The time when, running away from his righteously angry twin, he meets God at Luz, later named Bethel.

Prayer

Lord God with joyful hearts we come into your presence. We offer this time of worship to you and ask that you may so inspire us by your Spirit that we may meet you here as Jacob met you at Bethel and leave refreshed and renewed and confident again of your promise to be with us always.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn Jesus calls us o'er the tumult

Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult
of our life's wild restless sea,
day by day His voice is sounding,
saying, 'Christian, follow me.'

As of old, apostles heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home, and toil, and kindred,
leaving all for His dear sake.

Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store,
from each idol that would keep us,
saying, 'Christian, love Me more.'

In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still He calls, in cares and pleasures,
'Christian, love Me more than these.'

Jesus calls us! By Thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear Thy call,
give our hearts to Thine obedience,
serve and love Thee best of all.

Introduction

This morning's lectionary reading is Genesis 28 v 10 – 19 – the story of Jacob's Dream at Bethel.

There is so much we could say about this passage, so many sermons have been preached on it – I have offered a few myself.

On this occasion I want to approach it a different way – to offer you four insights, four thoughts that come out of the story.

You can relate them to each other if you want or maybe the only thing that links them is the story itself and that is perhaps the place to begin.

Reading Genesis 28 v 10 – 19

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

¹⁰ Jacob left the town of Beersheba and started out for Haran. ¹¹ At sunset he stopped for the night and went to sleep, resting his head on a large rock. ¹² In a dream he saw a ladder^[a] that reached from earth to heaven, and God's angels were going up and down on it.

¹³ The LORD was standing beside the ladder^[b] and said:

I am the LORD God who was worshiped by Abraham and Isaac. I will give to you and your family the land on which you are now sleeping. ¹⁴ Your descendants will spread over the earth in all directions and will become as numerous as the specks of dust. Your family will be a blessing to all people.^[c] ¹⁵ Wherever you go, I will watch over you, then later I will bring you back to this land. I won't leave you—I will do all I have promised.

¹⁶ Jacob woke up suddenly and thought, "The LORD is in this place, and I didn't even know it." ¹⁷ Then Jacob became frightened and said, "This is a fearsome place! It must be the house of God and the ladder^[d] to heaven."

¹⁸ When Jacob got up early the next morning, he took the rock that he had used for a pillow and stood it up for a place of worship. Then he poured olive oil on the rock to dedicate it to God, ¹⁹ and he named the place Bethel.^[e] Before that it had been named Luz.

Amazing Grace

If I live to be a hundred, I don't think I will ever understand God.

And I don't mean all the omnipotent, ineffable, omnipresent stuff – all those big words so bellowed by theologians.

No I mean, his grace in dealing with people. I can't get my head around it.

Take his dealings with Jacob for instance.

Jacob was a lying, scheming, good for nothing scoundrel. Down the pub they would have had a name for him, but I wouldn't want to repeat that here or indeed anywhere.

In Genesis 25, Jacob tricked his elder twin Esau out of his birthright. In Genesis 27 he tricked his dad Isaac into giving him the blessing due to Esau. Then in Genesis 28, as he's fleeing for his life, he encounters God at Bethel.

Now I don't like to think of myself as a particularly vindictive person, but I think if I had met Jacob at Bethel, I would have wanted to give him a piece of my mind. I think I would have Jacob a thorough talking to and I wouldn't have come to him in a dream – it would have been a nightmare.

But that is not what happens is it? No God reminds Jacob of the Covenant he made with Abraham and comforts him with the promise that that covenant made with his grandfather and extended to his Father Isaac, also applies to him.

Jacob is at his lowest ebb, and despite all that he has done, God comes to him with a words of love and comfort and promise.

This is the amazing grace of God and I won't even pretend to understand it.

I just accept it. That God doesn't hold grudges, God doesn't heap punishments upon us, that he didn't send Covid as retribution for all the evil in the world.

And there is the comfort of God. When we deserve a roasting, God comes with a blessing.

Whatever you have done, wherever you are in your life, even at your lowest ebb, God comes in grace to bring you comfort and renewal.

The amazing grace of God – far beyond the love of mankind.

Don't pretend to understand it. Just accept it – like Jacob.

Hymn Amazing Grace

Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –
that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we've first begun.

Prayers of Praise and Confession

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Blessed be his holy Name;
blessed in the highest heaven and blessed among the, people of his choice;
blessed in his glorious kingdom and blessed in his holy Church;
blessed in time and blessed through all eternity.

Most merciful God we confess to you the weakness of our faith and our lack of obedience to Your will;
we confess our reluctance to continue our pilgrim journey and our slowness to put our whole trust in you.

Forgive our foolishness and pardon our lack of dependence on your promises.
Grant us the joy of your mercy and the assurance of your guidance in the days to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven,
hallowed be Your Name.
Your will be done on earth as in Heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Do not bring us to the time of trial,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom,
the power and the glory are Yours
now and forever. Amen.

An open door

Loneliness is a funny thing.
Some of the loneliest times we experience can actually be when we are in the midst of other people.

You wouldn't think you could be lonely in a hospital. I mean thousands of people in the building with you – doctors, nurses, cleaners and cooks – all caring for you and catering for your every need. How could you possibly be lonely? And yet my loneliest moment was in hospital going down in the lift to theatre.

I felt utterly alone ... until the nurse who was accompanying me down from the ward, took my hand, squeezed it and said 'It will be fine'. It was a simple gesture but it really touched me and if I close my eyes, I can still see her face and her ginger hair.

She reached out to me in my loneliness, at my lowest ebb – maybe she was a ministering angel.

When Jacob was at his lowest ebb, God showed him a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. Angels were going up and down on it.

And that's the thing. Even at his lowest ebb, God showed Jacob that the door to heaven was metaphorically open, that there was a path of communication between earth and heaven.

When we are in our darkest moments, when we feel an overwhelming loneliness that no human can touch, even then we are not alone.

Jacob's dream reminds us that the gate of heaven is unlocked, that we push at an open door, because God is very near – always and in every situation.

He will come to us in our darkest hours - maybe even though the touch of a ginger haired nurse.

Reading John 1 v 43 – 51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. There he met Philip, who was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter. Jesus said to Philip, "Come with me."

⁴⁵ Philip then found Nathanael and said, "We have found the one that Moses and the Prophets^[1] wrote about. He is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth."

⁴⁶ Nathanael asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Philip answered, "Come and see."

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said, "Here is a true descendant of our ancestor Israel. And he isn't deceitful."^[2]

⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree."

⁴⁹ Nathanael said, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God and the King of Israel!"

⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Did you believe me just because I said that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see something even greater. ⁵¹I tell you for certain that you will see heaven open and God's angels going up and coming down on the Son of Man."^[3]

With twenty-twenty hindsight

When Jacob woke from his dream he said "The LORD is in this place, and I didn't even know it."

Twenty-twenty foresight is rare.

We were told that a special breed of person – super forecasters like Dominic Cummings might possess it, but it turned out not to be the case.

Twenty-twenty foresight is rare – maybe non-existent, but I think we all enjoy twenty-twenty hindsight.

We look back on events and think if only I knew then what I know now.

If only we had known how Covid would progress, we might have locked down more forcefully in the early days.

If only I had known that it would fall at the first fence, I wouldn't have backed that horse in the Grand National.

And if only I had known the grandchildren would be so great, I wouldn't have worried about being a granddad – see it works both ways – both joys and regrets.

It seems we all enjoy twenty-twenty hindsight, the ability to reflect on and reinterpret events, long after they are passed.

And that can be especially true of our relationship with God. It is only when we look back that we recognise God's presence. It is only when we think about the past, we realise how we have been shaped for the present.

I feel that particularly at our Chorley Church. We are very excited about the work that has gone on to transform the building – and we forget the long and tortuous road that has brought us to this point.

We forget about the abortive plans for Friday St and Bengal St and the disappointment when they fell through. But maybe with twenty-twenty hindsight we can see the hand of God there, guiding us to where we are now. Certainly I don't think we would have got to where we are now without the disappointments we experienced along the way.

So much of our experience of God is only understood in retrospect. Looking back with

twenty-twenty hindsight, we can fully see the hand of God on our lives.

Maybe that's how it has to be but we can take comfort and hope from this. When we recognise that the hand of God has been on our lives in the past, we may be confident that his hand is upon still – however unlikely that may seem.

It is difficult to see God at work during the present crisis, but we should take comfort from our past experiences, knowing that when eventually we look back on these present times with twenty-twenty hindsight, we will be able to see God at work even now.

Maybe then we will say with Jacob "The LORD is in this place, and I didn't even know it."

Prayers of Intercession

Listen, God is calling us on a journey through our lives, and in his world.

He is calling us to be his people with special tasks and his special help.

Lord God, we are your people:
Keep us eager and loyal.

God is calling us to the high places where policies and decisions are made.
We must work that in every government something of God's kingly rule may be found.
He is calling us to pray for the rulers of this world ...
(Silence)

Lord God, we are your people:
Keep us eager and loyal.

God is calling us to the low places where poverty and suffering reign.
We must work that Christ's brothers and sisters may be visited and comforted, fed and healed and loved, in his name.
He is calling us to pray for the needy of this world ...
(Silence)

Lord God, we are your people:
Keep us eager and loyal.

God is calling us to dangerous places, where sin and temptation abound.

We must work, loving the unlovable, forgiving, at terrible cost, risking everything for others, giving hope.

He is calling us to pray for the lost in the world ...

(Silence)

Lord, we are your people:

Keep us eager and loyal.

God is calling us to holy places, places where the church may find her Lord:

We find him in his world and in one another;

In the fellowship of worship, in the quiet of our souls.

God is calling us to work and to pray for the whole world.

Lord God, we are your people:

Keep us eager and loyal.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

So what now?

My apologies to any French people watching, but I always thought it was a terrific joke of Mrs Thatchers to arrange that trains through the new Channel Tunnel from France should arrive first at Waterloo -named in commemoration of that epic battle and of course the defeat of the French.

When the London terminal of the channel tunnel was moved to St Pancras, there was a rumour that the station was to be renamed Agincourt – but perhaps that would have been a step too far.

There is a long history going back to Biblical times, of memorialising events through their names.

So when Jacob encounters God, his natural reaction is to dedicate the stone he has used as a pillow as an altar and to rename the place Bethel – or in English House of God.

We don't memorialise in this way quite so often now – the tradition has lapsed somewhat, but maybe it is time for a revival. Maybe it is time for us, like Jacob, to begin to memorialise our

encounters with God – if not at the time, perhaps with hindsight as recognise God's hand on our lives.

And it might be a bit much for us seek to rename our towns and villages, but maybe our buildings, our churches, even our homes. Maybe we should look to name them or rename them in honour of the experience of God in our lives. Maybe we should rename the refurbished sanctuary at Chorley – not the church, just the sanctuary to memorialise our experience of God.

And if not our buildings, well then how about a simpler memorial. So here's the challenge to establish for yourself, a personal memorial of the experience of God in your life.

Perhaps through a piece of art, that expresses how you have experienced God. Perhaps through a piece of craft work or a piece of writing. Maybe through a spoken testimony of how God has worked in your life.

However you do it, I would like to challenge you to create a personal memorial to your meeting with God – and you don't have to but, if you want to share it, it would be great to include it in a future service.

Jacob took the rock that he had used for a pillow and stood it up for a place of worship. Then he poured olive oil on the rock to dedicate it to God, and he named the place Bethel.

We have the example.

Let us record for posterity, our encounters with God. We probably won't rename Chorley, Bethel, but I hope and pray, that people will know, like Jacob before us, that God was in this place.

God was in this place?

No – God is in this place.

Amen

Hymn Who would true valour see

He who would valiant be
 'gainst all disaster,
 let him in constancy
 follow the Master.
 There's no discouragement
 shall make him once relent,
 his first avowed intent
 to be a pilgrim.

Who so beset him round
 with dismal stories,
 do but themselves confound –
 his strength the more is.
 No foes shall stay his might,
 though he with giants fight:
 he will make good his right
 to be a pilgrim.

Since, Lord, Thou dost defend
 us with Thy Spirit,
 we know we at the end
 shall life inherit.
 Then fancies flee away!
 I'll fear not what men say,
 I'll labour night and day
 to be a pilgrim.

Blessing

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
 And the blessing of God Almighty,
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 will be with us evermore.
 Amen