

5 – JACOB. GOD THE WRESTLER.

The Rev. Dr Luigi Gioia

Genesis 32

³Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴He instructed them: “This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: ‘Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. ⁵I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.’ [...]”

⁹Then Jacob prayed, [...] and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau. [...] ²¹So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

²²That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

²⁴So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

²⁶Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

²⁷The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

²⁸Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

²⁹Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”

But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

1. The fight of Jacob with God in the book of Genesis: one of the most puzzling and yet for this very reason also deeply suggestive pages of Scripture.
2. Under Rebekah’s influence, Jacob had famously tricked his father Isaac into imparting on him the blessing of God originally destined to his older brother Esau¹.
 - 2.1. To escape the risk of retaliation from his brother, Jacob flees to Haran, where he marries Rachel and prospers.
 - 2.2. After a long time, his desire to go back to his own country and family becomes so burning that he is prepared to take the risk of facing his brother’s anger.
3. The night before his decisive meeting with his brother, Jacob crosses the ford of Jabbok, sends his family and herds ahead of him, and remains behind, alone.

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¹ Genesis 27.1-40.

- 3.1. He is aware that there is something he needs to settle with God.
 - 3.2. Something he had postponed for too long.
 - 3.3. The blessing he had stolen by deceit now had to be earned somehow.
 - 3.4. Thus we are told that “a man wrestled with him till daybreak” and the rest of the story makes clear that the mysterious character is not a human being but the Lord himself.
4. Two details are particularly significant in this story:
 - 4.1. the way Jacob fights, and
 - 4.2. how he wins the fight.
5. First the way Jacob fights:
 - 5.1. not through hurting his opponent, but by letting himself to hurt by him:
 “When the man saw that he could not overpower Jacob, he touched the socket of his hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled the man”.
6. Then, the way Jacob wins the fight:
 - 6.1. not through violence but by clinging to God, by not letting him go:
 “I will not let you go unless you bless me”.²
 - 6.2. It is this blessing that reveals the real nature of the fight:
 “Your name will no longer be Jacob but ‘Israel’, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome”.³
7. Etymologies are often uncertain but their very indeterminacy is valuable, generative, because it leaves a place to the imagination. All the more so in the case of names, as with ‘Israel’.
 - 7.1. The only aspect of the meaning of this name which is certain is its end, “El”, which is a diminutive of Elohim, the name of God.
 - 7.2. Insofar as this word is addressed to me today, I am Israel.
 - 7.3. God sees me so inseparably bound with him that he calls me by his name.
 - 7.4. God has chosen us, loved us to the point that this relationship has become who we are.
8. The name of Israel however enshrines an ambivalence which precludes any romantic idealization of love, whether between two human beings, or between God and each one of us. We are called by God’s name yes, but for what?
 - 8.1. Israel can equally mean:
 “She/he who has become a receptacle in which God can be received and retained”
 - 8.2. or, just as well,
 “She/He who struggles with God, fights with God”.
 - 8.3. There is a tension which etymology does not solve.
9. Being chosen by God, in the course of history, has been a blessing and a curse - for the chosen people, for the Church and for each one of us.
 - 9.1. God constantly loves us by challenging us, and we love him in return by trusting him, yes, but just as well by fighting back at him, crying out our frustration, our disappointment, and our anger to him.

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² Genesis 22.26.

³ Genesis 32.28.

10. But there is yet another significant details in this passage: when Jacob asks the Lord his name, as always in these cases, he gets an indirect answer:

“Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name’. But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’. Then he blessed him there”.⁴

10.1. We might think that this means that God refuses to answer Jacob’s question.

10.2. In reality, this answer implies that if we want to know who God is, we have to look at the way he behaves with us:

i. he wrestles with us, as we have seen, but also he blesses us.

ii. Which means that if we want God’s blessing we have to wrestle with him.

11. This is what the people of Israel did throughout its history and even more so, explains how the Bible came into existence and took the form we know today:

‘Our Bible was forged from a crisis of faith. Though many of its stories, proverbs, and poems were undoubtedly passed down through oral tradition, scholars believe the writing and compilation of most of Hebrew Scripture, also known as the Old Testament, began during the reign of King David and gained momentum during the Babylonian invasion of Judah and in the wake of the Babylonian exile [6th Century BC], when Israel was occupied by that mighty pagan empire. One cannot overstate the trauma of this exile. [...] This catastrophic event threw everything the people of Israel believed about themselves and about their God into question. Many assumed their collective sins were to blame and that with repentance their honor might be restored. Others feared God had abandoned them completely. Priests wondered how to conduct rituals and sacrifices without a temple or an altar, and parents worried their children would grow enamored by the wealth and power of Babylon and forget their own people’s most cherished values”.⁵

12. When all seemed lost and God seemed to hide, the people of Israel did not give up, but did exactly what its own name means:

12.1. they wrestled with God, went deeper and further than ever before in their questioning of God, in their meditation of the stories they had inherited, included the fight of Jacob with the angel

12.2. and exactly like Jacob, they did not let God go until they received a blessing, until they gained access to some meaning that would keep their hope alive during the 70 years of their exile, around which they could rally, and which would preserve their identity despite the fact that they were without a king, or priests or prophets, without a land and a temple, without the freedom to worship their Lord.

13. Just as in the case of Eve and Adam, Abraham, and Rebekah, so it is important to reflect on the story of Jacob wrestling with God because the only way of knowing God is seeing how he behaves in the lives of his friends.

14. We saw how, more than a dozen times in Scripture, God introduces himself as the “God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob”

Gen 50.24 And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

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⁴ Genesis 32.29.

⁵ Evans, Rachel Held. Inspired (series_title) (pp. 7-8). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Ex 3.25 God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

15. God loved Abraham, Isaac and Jacob so much, he bound himself to them to such a degree that this friendship became a badge of honour for him.
 - 15.1. This friendship is the best way he has found to describe himself, to introduce himself to others: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.
 - 15.2. He does this just in the same way as we would introduce ourselves saying 'I am the son of... the friend of... the husband or the wife of...'. If you want to know who I am, look at who my parents, my friends, my lover are.
 - 15.3. We are what we have become thanks to the meaningful relationships we have had in our lives. I would not be the same, had I not loved and been loved by these parents, inspired by these teachers, befriended these people, fallen in love with this particular person, for the better and sometimes for the worse.
16. God seems to say the same about himself. I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob certainly means:

'if you want to know who I am, look at the way I have behaved with my friends'.
17. More deeply however, it also means:

'I [God] would not be who I am had I not enjoyed the friendship of Abraham who heard my voice when nobody else had been capable or willing to do the same, helped me to relent when I was swept away by anger and disappointment, trusted me to the point of giving up his only son".

'I would not be who I am had I not enjoyed the friendship of Jacob who overcame his fear, accepted the struggle which in unavoidable in the relation with me, wrestled a blessing out of me, not only for himself, but for the whole of humanity'. And so on.
18. God's dealings with these people are real.
 - 18.1. He never fakes any of the feelings he displays to us as he demonstrates once for all when he takes flesh in Jesus.
 - 18.2. God's anger is real, but so is his ability to listen, his repentance, his pleasure in bargaining with us, his anguish at our betrayals, his thrill at our homecomings and more than anything else his passionate longing for strolling with us in the cool of the day.
 - 18.3. This bond, this reciprocal belonging, is what God has been trying to establish ever since he introduced himself for the first time to Abraham at the beginning of what we call sacred history.