

## Peniel: seeing God face to face

*Genesis 32:22-31; Ps 17:1-7,16; Romans 9:1-8 (9-16); Matthew 14:13-21*

*“Cheshire-Puss”, she began, “would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don’t care much where – ” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.<sup>1</sup>*

Alice may not have cared much about where she was going, but the question “Where do you want to get to” is one of vital importance to the individual Christian. It is a great tragedy that many people in our society have no idea of any direction or purpose in life. This vague outlook on life even affects many within the church today who seem content to stay exactly where they have always been, and make themselves as comfortable as they can.

Spiritual writers and thinkers, though, have often used the metaphor of a journey to describe the Christian life. It is a metaphor which speaks of movement, progress, and a clear goal. Perhaps the most famous example in the English-speaking world is *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. In this allegorical tale, the pilgrim, Christian by name, sets out from the City of Destruction bound for the Celestial City in the face of great opposition.

The lives of the Biblical patriarchs also show us people on a journey. Not only did Abraham, Isaac and Jacob move about physically with their families, their servants, their tents and their flocks and herds, but the metaphor of a journey applies to their moral and spiritual lives as well.

I am pleased that today’s Old Testament reading is about Jacob. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Samuel and David are often preached upon as great heroes of faith, but Jacob is far less often mentioned. In his moral character he was seriously flawed. His very name “Jacob” means the supplanter. In so many ways he mirrors some of the dodgy values of our own age. Because of this, Jacob’s story has much to teach us.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Jacob's life appears to have been one of struggle and anxiety. Even in his mother's womb, we are told "the children struggled together within her" (Gen. 25:22). Early in his life he seemed to have realised that trickery, deceit and opportunism would pay off. He cheated his twin brother Esau out of his inheritance, and deceitfully stole the blessing that by tradition should have gone to the elder one, Esau. His actions earned him his brother's hatred, and precipitated a family feud. As a consequence he had to flee in fear of his life.

Jacob, however, was a hard worker, and his work combined with sharp practice make him a rich, self-made man. He might well have said with the Psalmist "in my prosperity ...I shall never be moved: your goodness, O Lord, has set me on so firm a hill" (Ps. 30:6 PBV). He had achieved success, but all his material wealth only seemed to make him more worried and anxious.

Despite this, Jacob was not without some knowledge and experience of God. Two weeks ago we read of his dream at Bethel of a ladder "set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and ... angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28:12). Jacob recognised the presence of the Lord: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17). So Jacob was open to the awe and mystery of God, but not as yet to God's ownership of his life.

This morning's reading opens at a time when he has parted from Laban, his brother in law and is returning to Canaan. However, this means a meeting with his brother Esau, and the potential for serious conflict. Ever the schemer, Jacob devises a plan. He will send Esau a gift of some of his flocks and herds to appease Esau's wrath. Our reading takes up the story when Jacob is left alone, and crosses the Jabbok. Like crossing the Rubicon, this is the point where there is no turning back. It is the moment where Jacob, all alone now, has to face the danger of his situation. It is the moment of despair, and of crisis.

God, however, for Jacob and for us, is always there. In Jacob's case his personal encounter with God takes the form of a mighty struggle, a wrestling match. We are told "then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him

until daybreak” (Gen.32:24). Was this a man, an angel, or God Himself? For Jacob it was God.

What is the meaning of the encounter? After all one can hardly seriously consider a match between the divine and the human to be in any way an equal contest. The really significant moment in the encounter comes when the man asks “What is your name?” Of course the divine being knows Jacob’s name, but the significance for Jacob is that he must confront his own nature and name it. He must admit I am Jacob, the deceiver, the one who has grasped all that wealth and prosperity can offer, and yet has not found happiness. I am Jacob, facing the fact that I am mortal, weak and sinful and no match for God.

When he does this he is given a new name (Israel) and Jacob then asks for a blessing. Now the last time Jacob had asked for a blessing, it was from his blind old father, and he had lied and cheated to get it. This time however it is freely given to a new man, one who now realises that God’s blessing is all that matters. With it comes release from fear and anxiety. With it come peace and the favour of God.

Jacob moves from a just “bail-me-out” please mentality in his relationship with God to another level entirely. He moves from a superficial knowledge to a deep relationship. He moves from performance to encounter. God cared about Jacob enough to come and wrestle with him and bless him, and He cares about us enough to come to us and reveal Himself to us. Jacob named the place of his encounter Peniel “for he said “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (Gen 32:30).

I think many of us can testify to our faith lives resembling a journey. On that journey God may initiate defining moments. They may come at any time, but particularly in moments of crisis, times of despair and hopelessness. They may be painful encounters. Like Jacob, we may struggle with God, and like Jacob come away bearing scars. But as Jacob found, this will always be a time of “getting real”, a time of authentic encounter. And again as Jacob

found, we will realise that we are never out of God's hands or beyond His blessing. So very often, out of struggle and pain comes growth and new life.

I can certainly testify that in a dark and despairing period earlier in my own life I struggled to find the right way. In the end I was forced to acknowledge my own helplessness, inadequacies and sins. From the turmoil of that time came the unshakeable assurance of Jesus as Saviour, deliverer, healer, and guide, source of light and love, and destination of my journey. I had tried desperately hard to perform, but God wanted an encounter with me. He wanted me to see Him as He is and in what He has done for me.

The lesson of Peniel – seeing God face to face is so important for our time. In our contemporary western culture, and regrettably in many of our churches we are influenced by the addiction to and adulation of wealth, power, prestige, ambition, strength, confidence and success. Jacob had all these, but he also shared with our culture its darker side, the things we do not want to face: fear, failure, weakness, doubt, vulnerability and the fragility of our lives. Through his encounter he realised that the only thing that ultimately mattered was seeing God face to face, encountering Him. “Your love is better than life”<sup>2</sup> says the Psalmist, and indeed, God's love is better than all that life has to offer without Him.

What can we learn from the story of Jacob at Peniel?

Firstly, there must be a goal and direction in our spiritual lives. To stand still in the Christian life is to stagnate and die. Whether we are nine or ninety, we should be pressing on to know the Lord, going deeper, and growing in faith.

Secondly, the goal needs to have God in it if our lives are to be complete. Indeed, I would say that the goal needs to be God.

Thirdly, no matter how flawed we are, no matter how imperfect our lives may have been, if we are willing to recognise our essential helplessness and human weakness, God will meet us wherever we are. We will see Him face to face, to behold His beauty and His power. Like Jacob we will receive a

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 63:3

new name. We are changed from sinner to saint, from rebel to beloved child of God.

There is a curious little postscript to this sermon. As we worship here this morning, Wendy will be worshipping in a church in a village in western Bali. The name of that church is Peniel. And in Java, another of our Indonesian friends, Pastor Octav will be leading his little congregation in worship, and the name of his church is – Peniel! Perhaps the names indicate that those with so little in the way of material wealth nevertheless know the spiritual value of seeking to see God face to face.

We are never beyond God's tender care, and meeting Him face to face in genuine encounter will bless us and change us forever. God wanted Jacob's heart, and He wants ours too. Will we give Him our hearts, today?