

Sermon for Evensong on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity,
14th July 2019

Genesis 32:9-30, Mark 7:1-23 (see

<https://bible.oremus.org/?q|=430034390>) - Blessings

I could tell you a good story about Jacob and Esau and the beginnings of the nation of Israel: how Jacob cheated his brother Esau, as we heard last week; how he in turn was cheated by Laban, his relative, father of Leah and Rachel, so that eventually Jacob managed to marry both of them: how Jacob in his wandering prospered, again through some sharp practice, this time getting his own back on old Laban. He said Laban could have goats and sheep, provided they had certain markings on them, and Jacob would have the others, although quietly he was making sure that he was breeding only the sheep and the goats that had his markings on.

So Jacob became rich and prospered. Still, his brother Esau was out to get him, for taking away their father's blessing, his birthright. So Jacob went out with a huge gathering of cattle and various other presents for his brother to appease him, and to make him forgive him.

On the night before he was due to meet his brother, (and both of them were accompanied by private armies), he met a mysterious man, with whom he wrestled all night, and who dislocated his hip for him. He wouldn't tell Jacob his name, although the mysterious man said that Jacob's name would not be Jacob any more, but Israel, which means 'God strove', or 'God struggled', so Jacob deduced that he had had God as his opponent. Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, 'the face of God'.

I could tell you all that story; Oh, and I could also mention Jacob's dream, of the angels ascending and descending a ladder to and from heaven.

In the story there's a real intimacy between Jacob and God. It doesn't seem to be particularly the case that God is upholding Jacob because he is a good and moral man - which he clearly isn't; and even after Jacob has stolen his brother's birthright, nevertheless his father Isaac, too, seems to treat it as just one of those things. He blesses Jacob and he sends him out to start a family. I could tell you that story.

Or, I could go into the other story today in our Bible readings, about washing one's hands before you eat, and various other Jewish rules which were not part of the law of Moses, which Jesus condemned as forms of hypocrisy.

The part about washing hands doesn't translate very well into a modern context, but the other half of the story, where Jesus goes on to tick the Pharisees off for relying on the small print, relying on get-out clauses allowing them to avoid having to do good, to avoid having to care for their parents as it is laid down in the Law of Moses, is something we can easily understand.

Apparently a practice had grown up according to which people could get out of looking after their old Mums and Dads and devoting resources to it, if they had first set aside the bulk of their savings for a sacrifice, or sacrificial offering, to God. This is what was called 'Corban'.

Whatever was set aside as Corban was no longer available to be used to benefit one's family, one's aged parents, and so you were excused from having to look after them.

I could spend a long time teasing out all the various bits of meaning in our two Bible lessons. On one level you might possibly find it edifying, even enlightening; just as you would do,

if you were watching a documentary film or going to one of the Art Fund lectures at the Yehudi Menuhin School.

But then I think, an hour or so after you come out of church, you might have a moment of dismay, because those stories just don't bear on all the important things that are going on in our lives.

What on earth has wrestling with a mystery man in the night, or seeing angels climbing up and down to heaven, got to do with our worries about naval threats in the Gulf of Hormuz, or the unpredictability of Pres.Trump and his refusal to follow the norms of statesmanlike behaviour?

What do Jacob's wanderings and Jesus' teaching about hypocrisy really have to say to us in today's world? Some of it is, on its face, out of date or inappropriate. Our children really ought not to think that Jesus says it's OK not to wash your hands. (I know it's about ritual washing, but that's even further away from real life).

We are worried about knife crime. The terrible murder on the train at East Horsley. It was a shock. It seemed to be something that could have happened to any of us who commute on that line, on our local line to London. What has God got to do with that?

What will happen about 'Brexit'? Our country has already been greatly diminished in the eyes of the rest of the world and the preparations for Brexit have cost billions. Where will it end?

Austerity, over the last ten years, has not made our economy any stronger. But it has meant that the poorer people in our society are now desperately poor, and food banks are everywhere. Our own food bank will supply over 3,000 food parcels, locally, here in this area, in the next twelve months. What would Jesus say?

During the ITV debate between the two candidates for the Conservative leadership, when one was asked about his Christian faith, he said: “I sometimes pray. I’m like regular Church of England folk: it’s part of my life and my identity, but I don’t think it defines my politics.”

[<https://twitter.com/churchtimes/status/1149735677430390784?s=21>]

Why doesn’t his faith in God define his politics? Is there anything more important? How worrying is that? I’m not concerned about who the politician was or that it was one party or another: this could have been said by almost anyone. But he was an MP, an important person, a minister. Why shouldn’t such an MP’s faith influence his politics?

In the Bible, Jacob could talk to God and lament that he had not followed God’s commandments; but nevertheless God kept faith with him. They had this regular contact. In his dream he saw the angels climbing up and down a ladder, Jacob’s Ladder, into heaven. And God met him at night to wrestle with him. Was that a dream as well? Whatever it was, Jacob felt that he had seen the face of God; he had been close to God.

But we, we don’t seem to experience anything like that. Perhaps like the Pharisees, we’ve become too regimented in our approach to God. Perhaps our prayers are too formulaic. Perhaps we are not open enough to see the face of God any more. Perhaps we’re like that politician. Like the one who said, “I sometimes pray. I’m like regular Church of England folk: it’s part of my life and my identity, but I don’t think it defines my politics.”

When Jesus told the Pharisees not just to go through the motions, not just to follow the rules for the sake of following the rules, I think he could have been talking precisely about the ‘regular Church of England folk’ that this politician said he belonged to.

The Pharisees went through the motions, but they didn't actually do anything. It didn't 'define their politics'.

I think what Jesus is teaching us in relation to washing one's hands and setting aside resources that might have gone to look after your parents, is that this is sham love, and it is no good. Jesus wants us to show risky love, real love, the sort of thing he preached about in his Sermon on the Mount.

The love that Jesus was recommending, going the extra mile, loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, being like the Good Samaritan, is generous love and it's a love which is not calculating in any way. Paul wrote about it in 1 Corinthians 13. 'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant'. It isn't necessarily love which you can easily afford. It could be like the widow's mite. Not much, but it could be more than you can easily afford.

But when you do see that kind of giving, giving which does not count the cost, at work, when, (and this seems especially apt today, which is Sea Sunday), when you see the risks that Captain Carola Rackete, the young German sea captain, took in order to rescue refugees in the Mediterranean and take them to a safe port, even though it might result in her going to jail; or more mundanely and closer to home, when you see someone give their entire trolley of purchases from the supermarket to our Foodbank, all for their poor neighbours: it may not be a sensible gift: it may be really extravagant: but it is loving. It is a blessing. A real blessing, and I think we may begin to see the face of God in it.

Just as Jacob was really concerned to be blessed, to have his father's blessing and then for God to bless him - he said, 'I will not let you go until you bless me' - we need to look out for our blessings. If we count our blessings, I am confident that we are

going to find, not that we are alone, but that God really is still at work among us.

So may God bless us and keep us, and make His face to shine upon us.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant