

There’s a hymn that we used to sing as children. A couple of lines always made us giggle. They went like this:

“I will for ever with thee stay
And wrestle till the break of day”.

If my memory serves me right, this particular hymn might even have been located in the Marriage section of the book, which makes it even more giggle-worthy.

Be that as it may, these lines refer to the mysterious encounter between Jacob and God that we heard about in our first reading this-morning. There’s quite a back-story. Jacob has deceived his father and cheated his elder brother Esau out of his birthright, and has had to leave home in a hurry to escape his vengeance. He’s making his way back to his family roots in Haran to make a new start.

It’s obvious that Jacob is a rogue, but at the same time he is searching and longing to know God. On his journey he has a dream of a ladder linking earth and heaven, with God’s angels climbing up and down it. They are taking his humanity up to heaven and bringing the presence of God to stand beside him and protect him on earth. His ancestor Abraham had been promised that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Now the same promise is made to him.

Today we heard how this vocation was tested. Jacob encounters a mysterious figure in the darkness of the night and is challenged to wrestle with him. In this struggle, Jacob shows himself to be a courageous opponent and continues the fight until daybreak. Finally his hip is dislocated, but even though he’s injured he still won’t admit defeat. Jacob recognizes that his opponent is God’s messenger to him, and he insists on being blessed before he will agree to end the battle. He has come through his test because he has dared to look at the depths and the heights within himself. So as a sign of God’s blessing he is given a new name, Israel and becomes the founding father of his people.

I’ve always felt that the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel is a vivid image of spiritual growth that we can learn from. A lot of the time we find that life is a testing

business. Most of us, if the truth be told, have burdens that we are called upon to carry, and for some of us these are persistent and ongoing. Then there are those particularly challenging moments in our lives that we all have to face at some time or other – the death of a loved one, perhaps, or an illness. These can be earth-shattering and life-changing. Finding a way to work through them is demanding and difficult. It's a kind of struggle. And when we find ourselves struggling, we need to feel we are able to come to God with the truth of what we are experiencing. Our praying, at such times, can be like a wrestling match.

If you find this idea of struggling with God inappropriate, just look at the psalms. Perhaps you only associate the psalms with Anglican chants at Evensong. Try reading them as prayers, and you will discover that they are a wonderful resource. All human life is here, from the most furious vindictiveness to the most passionate desire. They were written by people who were often struggling to come to terms with God's apparent absence or unfairness, and they remind us that God is strong enough and accepting enough for us to be able to share everything with him, not least our rage and doubt, guilt and despair. If you use the psalms in your own praying it may help you to grapple with our often paradoxical, unfair, conflicted world, as well, of course, as helping you come to God with the whole of your vulnerable inner life.

Lord why have you rejected me?
Why have you hidden your face so far from me?
My friend and my neighbour you have put away from me,
and darkness is my companion.

It's worth remembering, too, that these are the prayers that were continually on Jesus' own lips, so when we pray the psalms, we are praying as he prayed. We know, for example, that on the cross, he was praying Psalm 22, which begins, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" In our times of darkness we are not alone; Jesus has been there before us.

Some people think that doubting is not permitted for Christians. If you have enough faith, they say, then you won't doubt. That's nonsense. Struggling with our doubts is part of the journey of faith, and it's as we struggle to understand and come to terms

with whatever life has thrown at us, that we begin to grow spiritually. We develop a sense of perspective. It's not all about us; it's a matter of recognizing that we are part of a much larger story, and our particular contribution is to be as trusting and as loving as we can be even though that may not be how we are actually feeling at this particular time.

Our weaknesses and vulnerabilities are very much a part of this. When Jacob had finished wrestling with the angel, he went on with his journey, limping because of his hip. His injury was part of the blessing that he took with him into his future life. It's natural for us to think of our vulnerabilities, our burdens, as things to be regretted or resented. That, I believe, is a mistaken attitude. St Paul put it well. "I will glory in the things that make for my weaknesses, for when I am weak, then am I most strong".

It's hard, in practice, to trust this mysterious truth, particularly over the things in our own lives and personalities that we struggle with. But reflect for a moment. When we are on top of the world, it's easy to feel that we can succeed on our own. We can rely on our own strength. But when we feel vulnerable, we are more likely to recognize that our own strength is never enough. That's when we tend to turn to God. And, of course, that's when we discover the grace that God provides. Living through our weaknesses encourages us to trust. The fact is that we wouldn't be the people we have become without the challenges we have had to face in our lives. If I can speak personally for a moment, I would like to tell you about our son who is disabled. He has an hereditary bone disease which about 15 years ago led to him developing cancer of the spine. During the worst of his illness, he felt that God was absent, and it took many months for him to work through this experience. He was disappointed, angry and hurt that he had apparently been abandoned. Finally, though, he came to rediscover his faith in a God who continues to work through his disability. A few years ago he was ordained and I don't think that he would be where he is now had he not gone through that particular testing time. Of course I'm not suggesting for a moment that our painful times are somehow God-given or are good in themselves. But I do believe that God can use our pains and our weaknesses, and transform them for good. That's what Easter reveals – God working through our hurts and failures to create new life through death, new beginnings through things that feel like endings.

But it doesn't come without our being willing to struggle to make sense of it all. The Christian life isn't soft-centred. Like Jacob, we are continually being offered the chance to bring every part of ourselves to God, the whole of our lives, the whole of our world, trusting that he will transform and renew and bless. It's a daily challenge. It's what we are doing in this Eucharist.

Jacob discovered this as a result of his wrestling match with the angel. It's as we are willing to bring to God the whole of our lives, including our anger, resentment, fears and doubts, that he is able to transform and renew us so that through our weaknesses we become strong. As the psalmist puts it:

Whom have I in heaven but you?
and having you I desire nothing upon earth.
Though my flesh and my heart should waste away
God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever