

Pentecost 12 (RCL 13A) – 3 August 2008

Genesis 32:32-31 & Matthew 14:13-21

Today we read two very well known stories from the Scriptures: Jesus feeding the 5000 and Jacob wrestling with ‘the angel’. Both these stories have been the inspiration for countless artists, poets, musicians, and theologians through the ages; both contain many layers of imagery and symbolic meaning.

For several weeks now we have been reading the saga of Jacob, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, and father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob, the second-born twin of Isaac & Rebekkah. Jacob, who struggled with his brother in his mother’s womb. Jacob, who grew up to cheat his brother Esau out of his inheritance and his father’s blessing, and then flees for fear of Esau’s reaction. Jacob, who encountered God at Bethel and had the divine promise that had been made to Abraham renewed in him, and through him, to become a blessing to all peoples on earth. Jacob, the conman, who was outsmarted by his uncle Laban into 14 years of servitude for the gift of his daughters Leah and Rachel. (As an example of ‘biblical family values’ uncle Laban also became Jacob’s father-in-law, oh and Jacob had two wives, ummm... and they were sisters).

And so, the years have passed, the swindling and family feuding have continued, Jacob has grown rich with a large family and household; the time has now come for him to return home and face up to his brother Esau.

The night before he is due to encounter his brother, Jacob sends all those with him across the stream of Jabbok (a tributary of the Jordan) and he spends the night there alone. Somewhat like Richard III waiting to do battle at Bosworth Field, Jacob spends the night wrestling with what he has been, what he has done, who he is, and what lies ahead.

The Scriptural text is both plain and obscure: Is it a dream? Is it real? Who is this un-named assailant with whom he wrestles? Is it his conscience? Is it his demons? Is it the divine presence concealed in some human or angelic form?

Sleepless nights, wrestling with demons, are the stuff of legend, and our experience. I have never been a good sleeper and I know what it’s like to lie awake, or semi-awake, and not be able to slow the rush of thoughts and worries, especially if I have to preach a sermon the next morning!

For Jacob, this night of struggle is his moment of truth. His success, often ill-gained, now hangs in the balance as he prepares to encounter his brother Esau. Has it all been worth it? What has it all been for?

Finally, day begins to break and the struggle comes to an end, neither Jacob nor the assailant has won an outright victory – struggles and battles are often like that. Jacob has prevailed but he is aware that he is wounded.

He is still Jacob but is now also called Israel – the ‘conman’ who has ‘struggled with God and humans’ and now walks with a limp (to remind him of that struggle). It is not his demons that he has been wrestling with. He has wrestled with being blessed and what it means to be blessed.

It seems to me a constant irony that this is the case. It is often not the bad things that worry us but the good things. It is often not failure we fear but success. It is not the worry of being cursed but of being blessed.

Words of Nelson Mandela (from his presidential inauguration speech) always ring true for me:

*Our deepest fear
is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear
is that we are powerful
beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness,
that most frightens us.*

For the disciples of Jesus (in today’s Gospel reading) the hardest thing to come to terms with is not what to make of a lack of resources, it’s what to do with twelve baskets full of abundance, twelve baskets full of abundant blessing.

This can be, and perhaps *should* be, our struggle at every eucharist: What do we do with this abundance of blessing that we are given, and given over and over again?

For Jacob, the all-night struggle had been worth it. It is a shame in the lectionary we don’t read what follows:

“Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” (Genesis 33:1-4)

In a movie version, that’s probably where things would end, but in the Book version, as time goes by, Jacob will muck things up with his brother yet again and ultimately it will be through his young son Joseph that the story – and the divine blessing – will continue (in Egypt and beyond).

And now, several thousand years later, the descendants of Jacob and Esau are still struggling with what it means to be blessed, what it means to be related to each other, and what it means to share a common land.

And we too, the disciples of Jesus, a couple of thousand years down the track, continue to struggle with what it means to be blessed by God, and to be the bearers of that blessing to the world.

So may it be.

Paul Bower
Associate Priest
Christ Church South Yarra