

## **Sermon - GETTING TO GRIPS WITH GOD**

Gen 32:22-31 Rom 9:1-5

When Angela and I were part of a youth group in SA, one of the songs that we sang began, 'When you grip the hand of God, grip the might hand of God, there is nothing you cannot do...' On one occasion we had a visiting speaker and we sang that song, 'When you grip the hand of God...' The speaker looked very puzzled. He had understood us to be singing, 'When you grip the handlebars...'

Getting to grips with God. That was true of Jacob in more ways than one in that encounter we read about in Genesis 32. Jacob is at a critical point in his life. The next day he would be meeting his brother Esau for the first time in many years. Jacob is very apprehensive, and for good reason. Jacob had stolen Esau's blessing, his birthright, and he then went off to a faraway place, to put as much distance as possible between him and his brother, and also to get himself a wife from his father's homeland.

Jacob's name means 'supplanter' or 'deceiver', and on various occasions he lived up to that title. But now his life is catching up with him. His brother is coming to meet him with a force of 400 men, which is not a good sign. But before that He comes face to face with God and has to confront his deceptive and devious past.

At the Jabbok river Jacob sends ahead the rest of the group and he is left alone that night. He is separated from his possessions and the significant people in his life. And that is when he has this dramatic meeting with God. Is that not often the case – that when we allow ourselves to be naked and exposed before God, we are able to see ourselves for what we are, and God is able to do a work of transformation in us. The problem is that often we don't make time and space for that. We allow ourselves to be constantly surrounded by noise and activity, by people and things, and there is sometimes little or no room for God to meet us.

But for Jacob there is that life-changing encounter where he meets God and wrestles with God and God wrestles with him. And God breaks something of the wilfulness and deception of Jacob and Jacob emerges a new person, with a new name. When we allow ourselves to get to grips with God, we will always come away different and better people.

The new name that Jacob receives is the name 'Israel', meaning 'one who strives or struggles with God'. That's not how we would normally describe a relationship with God, is it? As a wrestling match? Our view is more likely one of a formal handshake than a wrestling match. The problem with the formal handshake is that it keeps us at arm's length from God. And our relationship can end up being cool and distant. But the real thing, says this passage, is getting in there and getting to grips with God; being real – love, joy, tears, passion, struggling, questioning, arguing even. The kind of thing we see in the Psalms – real feelings and passions.

Listen to this verse from Lk 16:16, '...the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force.' It's a difficult verse, but it seems to be saying that we don't simply drift into the kingdom of God. Rather, God's kingdom is for those who want it deeply, desperately, passionately; those who are prepared to strive and struggle for it. God and God's kingdom is not simply for the well-meaning, but the desperate.

'I will not let you go, unless you bless me', says Jacob. I am reminded of the words of Jesus, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled'. And the words of Paul, 'All I want is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.'

So how does Jacob emerge from this experience? He emerges a lot less proud, less stubborn and manipulative. There is a greater sense of his weakness and vulnerability which is symbolised in the limp with which he walks. But he emerges also with a faith which is much more real and living and passionate. And having faced God he is able to face his brother and to be reconciled to him.

So what is all this saying to us? I think it is saying, don't let your faith be just a matter of 'tipping your hat at God'; 'giving him his due', so to speak. Come to grips with God and your faith in him. Strive, struggle – with blood, sweat and tears if necessary.

Does this mean that God is a God whose arm has to be twisted in order to receive his grace and blessing? Does it mean that God is stingy with his love and mercy? No, of course it doesn't. We all know that God is a gracious and generous Father. Rather, it's asking a question about us, rather than about God. It's asking me, 'Do I want God deeply and desperately? Is God the very centre of things for me, or is he just an optional extra? Do I have the desire of a Jacob, of a Zaccheus in his tree, of a woman who gatecrashes a high society party and kneels before Jesus and washes his feet with her hair?

God's grace and mercy are abundant beyond measure; but God won't force them on us. The robe and the ring and the feast are for those who, like the Prodigal Son, have come to their senses and want desperately, more than anything else, to return to the loving, waiting Father.

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn all about this episode in Jacob's life. It goes on for 12 verses, but I'm going to read just some of them:

*1. Come, O thou Traveller unknown,  
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!  
My company before is gone,  
And I am left alone with Thee;  
With Thee all night I mean to stay,  
And wrestle till the break of day.*

*2. I need not tell Thee who I am,  
My misery and sin declare;  
Thyself hast called me by my name,  
Look on Thy hands, and read it there;  
But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?  
Tell me Thy name, and tell me now.*

*3. In vain Thou strugglest to get free,  
I never will unloose my hold!  
Art Thou the Man that died for me?  
The secret of Thy love unfold;  
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,  
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.*

*4. 'Tis all in vain to hold Thy tongue  
Or touch the hollow of my thigh;  
Though every sinew be unstrung,  
Out of my arms Thou shalt not fly;  
Wrestling I will not let Thee go  
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.*

*5. Yield to me now, for I am weak,  
But confident in self-despair;  
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,  
Be conquered by my instant prayer;  
Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move,  
And tell me if Thy Name is Love.*

*6. 'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me!  
I hear Thy whisper in my heart;  
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,  
Pure, universal love Thou art;  
To me, to all, Thy mercies move;  
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.*

*7. All helplessness, all weakness I  
On Thee alone for strength depend;  
I leap for joy, pursue my way,  
And as a bounding deer fly home,  
In vain I have not wept and strove;  
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.*

So maybe there is a case, after all, for 'Gripping the handle bars'; gripping the handle bars and pedalling for all that we are worth on the road back to the Father. And finding a Father who runs out to meet us and welcome us home. Who embraces us with His firm grip that will never let us go. Amen