

Sermon 31 July 2011

Struggling with God face to face

Genesis 32:22-31

Matthew 14: 13-21

If you know the enemy, and know yourself

You need not fear the result of a hundred battles.

If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.

If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle. (Sun Tzu 6th-5th Century BC The Art of War).

Jesus had just heard of the death of his beloved cousin John, the one who had baptised him. He went away to a quiet place to pray, to take it all in, to take stock, to rest... but it was not to be for long.... Genesis 32: 22 – 31.

Jacob too takes time alone. He is going with his wives and children. But going home means coming face to face with his twin brother Esau., the one from whom he had stolen a blessing and his inheritance. It had been a long time, and though he had sent presents ahead as a token of peace, Joseph was afraid – terrified in fact. He made sure his family was safe on the other side of the river. Then he withdrew to face himself and his God – to face his demons. It was a restless night. He was unsettled until daybreak. Do you know that experience?.

What challenges are you wrestling with,. a decision perhaps? or a difficult relationship? How are your nights? Are you sleeping? Have you considered drawing apart? And the possibility of a holy encounter in the struggle?

As you know, I took a week at home while I was on leave. I was sitting with some questions. I rested in the silence, tussled, walked the labyrinth, was found by God, I moved away from my community to pray. Thankfully, I came back enlivened, clear, and not limping.

Jacob has still been conniving. Trying to control things – make them go his way. Sending more and more gifts, but he's hit the wall – and is left facing God. He struggles and wrestles with the intensity of a two year old's tantrum, until, finally, he is blessed, and he is changed. He is a new man, 'one who has striven with God and humans and prevailed'.

'Israel' , he is named, to begin this next part of his life, his new vocation.

I have never changed my surname, but have changed my first name slightly a number of times, often marking changes on the inside. "Sue" while I was growing up. I changed the spelling to Su with a line over the U after I came back from 12 months in Japan , then back to Sue. Susanne, my birth name, when I moved back to Sydney after living in Adelaide., then Susanna after completing my diploma in remedial massage and beginning work as a massage therapist almost 7 years ago now. Susanna expresses for me who I am.

Jacob is now to be Israel, wounded, limping, blessed (having taken time out to wrestle, to make sense of it all, to bring his fears, his life's journey, his intentions). He has seen God (and himself) face to face and lived, and soon, today in fact, he will meet his brother who he has cheated and see in him the face of God – see in his brother Esau, God's face

After he had spent the night wrestling, Jacob ended up with a new name, a name which carried new vision, a new vocation. Here is the promise that I too can hope to win through to a new life . It strikes me afresh when I read the story as told by Keith Ward.

Jacob walked slowly across the river, his mind numb and confused. 'last night' he thought 'I fought with a man until the breaking of day. But what was it I fought? My own fear? A demon of the river? Or was it the one who knows me through and through, who has given me a new name and his blessing, who calls me to pursue his promise and follow his way?'

Jacob leaves limping, but he does at least move forward, unlike Lot's wife who is turned into a pillar of salt because she cannot stop gazing at what she has lost. Sometimes we may be faced with a dramatic night-long struggle with darkness, sometimes we simply face the quieter struggle of daily trials and difficulties, which Helen Luke calls 'the day to day onslaughts of hurt feelings, black moods and exhaustion'. This is the choice: to walk forward courageously or to look back and cling to what is no longer there. Do we need a poet to tell us we can never return to the past? Of course there is a deep longing to return to Eden. But Edwin Muir, born into the paradise of an Orkney island where men and women and children were at one, and then forced because of poverty to leave, reminds us in his poem 'One Foot in Eden' that Eden has to go. But in its place 'strange blessings' as blackened trees give way to new blossoms, not innocence restored but something new and different:

But famished field and blackened tree

Bear flowers in Eden never known.

Blossoms of grief and charity

Bloom in those darkened fields alone.

So this day ends not with easy answers but with the confidence of the Poet who tells us that from the darkened fields will come new flowers, blossoms that we could have never imagined.

(From Lost in wonder, Esther De Waal..p113-114).

I end with a poem I heard half way through my pilgrimage on Iona. (It is attributed to Alcoholics Anonymous)

Letting go takes love (anon).

To let go does not mean to stop caring

It means I can't do it for someone else.

To let go is not to cut myself off,

It's the realisation I can't control another.

To let go is not to enable,

But to allow learning from natural consequences.

To let go is to admit powerlessness, which means

The outcome is not in my hands.

To let go is not to try to change or blame another,

It is to make the most of myself.

To let go is not to care for but to care about.

To let go is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To let go is not to judge,

But to allow another to be a human being.

To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes,

But to allow others to affect their destinies.

To let go is not to be protective,

It is to permit another to face reality.

To let go is not to deny, but to accept.

To let go is not to nag, scold, or argue,

But instead to search out my own shortcomings and connect them.

To let go is not to adjust everything to my own desires,

But to take each day as it comes, and cherish myself in it.

To let go is not to criticise or regulate anybody,

But to try to become what I dream I can be.

To let go is not to regret the past, but to grow and live for the future.

To let go is to fear less and love more.

Remember the time to love is short.