

The adventures of Jacob
Being blessed – defeated, decisively – that’s how he grows!
(Genesis 32.22-32)
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Last week, we left Jacob serving out a second seven years in Laban’s household in exchange for Rachel, as a wife. This morning, it picked up a further six years later. After twenty years in Haran, Jacob is finally leaving. There have been trials, but these have not broken Jacob. On the contrary, he’s gained. He’s acquired wives, children, flocks, and possessions – become a small clan. He’s gained sufficient dignity and courage to declare his independence, and, with it, newfound desire to return to the land of his father. He’s struggled and endured, he’s stronger for it, and now he’s heading home. There’s just one thing that stands in the way of a successful return – Esau, his aggrieved brother!!

At the point our reading kicks in, Jacob is afraid. For twenty years, he’s managed to avoid the brother he swindled of both birthright and blessing, but now he’s on a collision course with Esau. In a few more hours they’ll meet, and Jacob is apprehensive!!

Ever the strategist, he’d sent messengers ahead to get a sense of things (32.3). They returned with the news that Esau (together with four hundred men!!) was coming out to meet him. And *Jacob ‘was greatly afraid and distressed’* (7). He divides his company into two groups and, for the first time in his life (as far as we know), this chronically self-reliant schemer turns to God in humble, heartfelt prayer:

*O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord,
you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your
relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ I am unworthy of all*

the kindness and faithfulness you've shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me ... from ... my brother Esau, for I'm afraid he'll ... attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you said, 'I'll surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea...

Isn't it amazing how fear can bring us to our knees! Jacob is changing. Mind you, he hasn't lost his smarts. His next move is to send ahead wave after wave of gifts in the hope of placating Esau. Will it work? The stakes are high!

As the day draws in, Jacob and his reduced retinue camp on the edge of the ford of Jabbok. In the middle of the night, anxious and unable to sleep, he gets up, moves his family across the ford, presumably as a last line of defence, and then crosses back. And, it says, he 'was left alone'. And I encourage you to feel the gravity of this comment, this moment. When Jacob stole Esau's blessing, he was aided and abetted by his mother and covered in skins to deceive his father who, because of blindness, was in the dark. This time, it's Jacob in the dark; Jacob on his own, Jacob exposed. He's spent his life acquiring things (often at another's expense), but on this occasion he deliberately divests himself of *'everything he had'* (23). It's a moment of sheer reckoning. There are no more defences, no more distractions, no more excuses. It's time to 'face up' (and in the Hebrew text, there are many references to 'face'). And, in this moment of aloneness, paradoxically, Jacob finds himself fighting for his life. *'And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.'*

He's preparing to face his brother, yet before that he comes face-to-face with an adversary he wasn't expecting. But who is this

shadowy antagonist that assaults him? What's going on here? Some interpret this scene metaphorically and suggest Jacob is fighting with a part of himself; his shadow... his conscience... his fear. Is that who this 'man' is? Or is he a bandit, a demon, an angel? Later, Jacob refers to the assailant as God, but it's never confirmed; no name is given. Whoever he was, the fact that they *wrestled* suggests a very personal struggle – intense, intimate and full-bodied (see images).

It appears the combatants are evenly matched. Which is interesting if it is God he's wrestling, for surely God could crush him? Then again, maybe this confrontation isn't about winning. Perhaps the struggle itself is the point. They wrestle on, and on, the *whole* night. As dawn broke and his rival saw that he did not prevail, he struck Jacob's hip socket putting it out of joint. An agonising and decisive blow you'd think, but the ever-desperate, ever determined Jacob will not give up. *'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'*

Now, we know this is what he says, but have you ever wondered why? Whatever possessed Jacob to think there could be a *blessing* in this ordeal? It seems counter-intuitive, but the deep wisdom of these biblical stories and many of the great myths is that these dark, difficult struggles *do* yield blessing. Think of Dante in the Inferno, of Odysseus and his epic journey back to Ithaca – the protagonist hangs on and on because they must, because somehow deep down they know there's blessing in this. I recognise this in my own experience. That which I had felt to be a terrible failure or betrayal in my life, indeed, the 'end' of my life, eventually broke open in blessing.

'I will not let you go unless you bless me,' Jacob says and his assailant responds with a request that calls for more vulnerability and stripping. Why? Because to answer, Jacob must acknowledge who he is. *'What's your name?'* the man asks. *'Jacob'*, he replies, and ain't that the truth! *'Jacob'* means *'heel-grabber,' 'deceiver,' 'crooked one,'* and that's exactly who he's been. Ironically, in giving his name (*'deceiver'*) he's being totally honest. In response, and perhaps only because of this honesty, the blessing is given: *'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel (meaning 'he strives with God') for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.'*

Jacob prevails here, not by overcoming the man – by winning, but by hanging on, by refusing to run from this ordeal and what it reveals. But who is it that gives this blessing?? *'Please, tell me your name'*, Jacob asks. No name is supplied, a sign that Jacob is contending with someone who will not be grasped or reduced, a being, a truth, a reality far larger and more mysterious than he.

And so, Jacob receives a new identity (Israel) through an experience he undergoes courageously but never fully masters – *'This is how he grows,'* says the poet Rilke, *'by being defeated decisively by constantly greater beings'* (*'The Man Watching'*).

And here, we get perhaps our best insight into the true nature of blessing, which is clearly more than a comfortable or consoling gift. This blessing comes at the end of an exhausting, humbling (and, at times, terrifying) struggle; there are no sweet words or gentle Celtic breezes here, it is a searing truth he receives. He names the place *Peniel* (*'God's face'*), saying, *'For I've seen God face-to-face' (faced God) and yet my life is preserved'*. That's true, he's wounded, walks with a limp,

but the encounter didn't destroy him. In fact, it's changed him, and this in turn affects the world around, as happens in the unfolding of that new day.

As Jacob limps away from Peniel he looks up and OMG! sees Esau and 400 men coming towards him (33.1). Jacob immediately lines up his wives and children. And then, in a move totally new, he stands in *front*, between them and the threat. It's a telling moment. Finally, Jacob caring *for others and their future*; facing his brother rather than deceiving, running, hiding. Previously, he cared only for himself. He's changed and here's proof. And the effect is significant, for rather than attacking, Esau '*ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept*' (33.4). It's a very moving scene. For the first time in their lives, these twin brothers are truly reconciled.

Jacob's story is of a long process of transformation. It involves learning to receive rather than grasp, learning to be with himself, with his God, and with and for others. And it took years – during some of which it seemed he had very little contact with God, and made very little progress. He'd tried to grab blessing – as if it were a pre-packaged entity you could possess; but what he discovered is that true blessing is profoundly self-implicating. It involves the integration of the self and for that, you have to show up, be vulnerable, be humbled – the blessing is worked out *in* the whole of his life, with implications *for* the whole of life. Jacob is finally 'grasping' (!) we are blessed to *be a blessing*. And that's the invitation to us too – through our persevering struggles with ourselves, with God and others, to receive blessing, to be reconciled, that we may play our part in the reconciliation of all things.