

## Sermon – Pentecost 10

### Genesis 32:22-31

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. **Amen.**

This week, has been a week that I committed time to planning; planning for our children's and families services and also our playgroup which we hope to offer in 4th term. How do you find planning? Some of us love planning, but I know from personal experience that others find it something of a wrestling match. There are too many options, and sometimes options seem to contradict each other, making for a confusing and exhausting process. Our Old Testament reading today provides us with a well known story of a wrestling match: the story of Jacob wrestling all night with an unidentified person, and ultimately receiving a blessing but retaining a wound from his experience. So today, I want to reflect on how this reading is a metaphor of our own lives and experiences, when we too wrestle with difficult issues and situations.

Well, you might remember the story of Jacob. He was the one who tricked his father in his old age to give him the blessing reserved for the first-born son, effectively duping his older brother Esau out of his birth right. This led to him leaving town in a hurry and going to his uncle, working for him for 20 years, and along the way marrying his two daughters. Today, we find Jacob and his family on their way back to the home he left. He is journeying back to seek reconciliation with his brother Esau. He is in a liminal space, sometimes described as a doorstep space, the space between the inside

and the outside. A space between his past life, working for his uncle, and the unknown future waiting for him back in his homelands.

It's an interesting place to be in this liminal space, isn't it? Sometimes we enter into such a space as one person and come out of it completely changed. Can you think of a time when you were between, say two stages of your life, and for a period of time, you were neither here nor there. How did this feel? A bit uncomfortable, a bit at a loss, perhaps even a bit open or alert to new things. I think that when we are in this state of disconnection, finished with the old, but not yet engaged with the new, that it can be a time of opportunity for significant transformation. And isn't this what happens with Jacob?

Jacob is, to use a modern term, an operator. He's clever, wily, and believes that hard work reaps rewards. He's quite a modern day man really. He defines himself by his own work and the ability to meet objectives and be successful. I suspect Jacob would fit well into our contemporary capitalist world, with the underpinning philosophy that if you work hard, you will get ahead. His identity is wrapped up in his own achievement and his own strength. His 20 years of labour for his uncle have produced two wives and two concubines and eleven sons - the daughters don't really count in these biblical times!

So it is night time in our scripture today and Jacob is alone. He's already sent his family and livestock forward across the river. And into this alone space comes a man and Jacob wrestles with him until daybreak. The struggle is long and the stranger hurts him, dislocates his hip and Jacob leaves the encounter with a limp. He also leaves with his name changed to Israel and

a blessing. He leaves saying “I have seen God face to face”. He is a changed man.

What happens to Jacob? He goes in as one man, Jacob, a man defined by his own strength and achievement, and comes out as Israel, a man who has encountered the transcendent, who is now defined by his relationship with God. A man who recognized his need for God and that his strength comes from God. A man who struggled in the darkness, perhaps struggling with letting go of his old identity, a wounded man, a blessed man. Isn't this the story of all our lives? Have we too not struggled? Aren't we also wounded? And in our darkness, have we also encountered God? Has there been a time in your life when you have gone in to struggle with God and come out a different person? In the struggle, have you had to let go of some things, and take on others? We all find God in different places and circumstances but I think this story emphasizes that God is there in the messiness, in the hard times, and that it is often through these hard times that we can change and grow. Perhaps it is in the encounter with God that we are both wounded and blessed, that we come to understand how much we need this God with whom we can have a relationship, a relationship that defines us, which is far greater than work or whatever else it might be that we identify ourselves with.

So what happens with Jacob? We know that after this struggle, he is reconciled with Esau, who greets his return by running to him and embracing him. Clearly the twenty years of separation have healed the wounds! And I think that this idea of reconciliation is a very pertinent one for our own times. At a personal level, how can we find reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who don't share the same viewpoint or experience as ourselves? There are often issues to separate us from friends and family. Even in the

church there are issues that sometimes seem insurmountable, people passionately holding onto their perspectives. Recently we have seen the division within the Anglican church both in Australia and globally about the issue of same sex marriage and blessings. And at a societal level, deep and complex issues also seem to abound. For example, how can we find reconciliation between first and second nations people? I think that we will, as a country, go into a liminal space when the referendum date is announced possibly later this month. It will be the space between the now, the current state of indigenous people, who as a group, have lower material outcomes based on the accepted measures of well being, such as life expectancy, education levels and income levels. And this is despite our own knowledge of significant high performing or high achieving aboriginal people. As a group, the aboriginal people, are less well off than the rest of us, as a group.

This liminal space that we will enter into, between the now, the current state, and the possibility of something different, will, I am sure, be filled with wrestling. And I am sure that all parties of the wrestling to come, will want only better outcomes for aboriginal people, just as all governments, since my own adult life, have strived, and failed, to achieve better outcomes for them. How will this wrestling match end up? Will we, like Jacob, have a different identity at the end of it? Will we be wounded at the end of the night? Will we be blessed? Will we have a new identity? What would the transcendent one, the God of justice and reconciliation, want for our nation?

These are all questions that I think we should ponder very carefully. And as we journey through our liturgy today, we pass the peace between each other, and then head to the communion rail to be united with Christ, let us remember our Gospel reading of the miracle of the loaves and the fish, that

God is a generous God, that there truly is enough in this world for all of us, if we choose to share. That we too can be generous in our choices, if we allow ourselves to walk away from fear. Our God is a God of justice. So in these times of wrestling, of difficult and complex issues which threaten to divide us, let us keep up our prayers and trust in God that he will do justice and pray that our country will discern the way forward with these issues. Let us pray.

Loving God, we put before you the first and second nations people of this country and the referendum that we will soon be participating in. We ask that your spirit of love and inclusion permeate all those who take these issues forward. We ask for healing for those who have been wounded in the past and also through the debate to follow, and pray that we can all find reconciliation with each other and with you. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.