

Trinity 18 (Proper 24)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 20 October 2019

Readings: Genesis 32 vv 22-31 and Luke 18 vv 1-8

The lectionary presents us today with two rather puzzling readings.

The story in Genesis of Jacob wrestling is full of mystery. However we need to remember some earlier events in Jacob's life, especially the rather dishonest way in which he cheated his elder brother Esau out of his rights as the elder son of his father, Isaac, and his mother, Rebecca. As we meet Jacob in today's reading, Jacob is nervous about a meeting with Esau. He fears that Esau will kill him. And so he prays to God, albeit a God whom he scarcely knows.

Jacob sends his family and their servants across the ford of Jabbok. Alone, he meets the divine stranger and they struggle all night. Jacob refuses to submit. He tries to force a blessing from the stranger, but none is forthcoming. Instead, he is given something for which he has not asked: a new name and a new destiny. This is not what he had expected. He pushed back against the stranger, asking to know his name and his character. But this is not granted – and the revelation of God's name and his identity must await Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush, many years later. Jacob must make do with a blessing.

This is a transforming moment. Jacob realises that he has had a narrow escape: 'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' He is no longer simply the master of his own destiny – the damage to his hip is a reminder of that struggle which has left him changed. He is blessed, but at a cost. Jacob has met God and struggled. Jacob is not destroyed, but he is disarmed; his old pride and his own fears are gone. Jacob has a new power alongside his physical weakness. He is able to meet Esau with grace, with openness and respect, and the rift is healed.

A true encounter with God is costly, and may not be what we want or expect. But great things can come out of it, even if they are not of our own choosing.

And this is very much the theme of the gospel reading.

St Luke makes it clear that we must not misunderstand the parable or interpret it wrongly: 'Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.'

The parable makes no suggestion that God is like the judge. Rather, it teaches us what God is not like – and what our prayer is not.

The judge is like no judge I have met. He is certainly not like any of the judges of the Royal Court. He is grumpy and self-centred. We are offered a caricature.

The judge appears to have no reason to grant the woman's request for justice. He does not care what others think and seems to have no concept of his duty to God, who is the author and fount of justice. The only reason for giving in to the woman is simply to give him some peace and quiet. These are not good motives for justice!

God is very different. He is not resentful of our prayers. But whilst we cannot ignore the frustration and even the anguish of seemingly unanswered prayer, it is all too easy to forget the answers and the blessings that we have received in the past.

The mistake we make with this parable is that we can be led to think that God is like the judge. He is not. The real comparison is between us and the widow. Are we persistent, or do we give up, our patience exhausted? The widow in the parable was motivated by nothing other than the justice of her cause.

The message for us, I suggest, is that as we pray, we have to face the truth about how we seek God and the truth about ourselves. This means that as we continue in prayer, we find ourselves reflecting on what our yearnings are and whether they will be satisfied by God in ways which, initially at least, we did not imagine or expect. But the answer, even if it is not what we expected, is so often far more than we had dared to ask and which we can, by God's grace, receive with joy.