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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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3rd July: 6th after Trinity

SHE SAID 'YES'

By Dr Patricia Batstone
Honiton, Devon

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17;
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Genesis 24:58 – And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will'.

Introduction

One of the unforgettable horrors of the twentieth century was the massacre by two students of thirteen others at Columbine High School, Colorado; another, twenty-four hours earlier, was that of Dunblane, where sixteen children and their teacher were also shot, for no apparent reason. Indeed this, like the massacre at Beslan in 2004, may seem even more terrible to us because their victims were children – the innocents. But the stories coming out of Columbine were slightly different. These weren't unknowns on a senseless killing spree, but people they knew with a carefully planned agenda – one which included the need for Christians to stand up and be counted: 'Are you a Christian?' asked the young gunman as he looked down at the girl at her desk. She said 'Yes!' And he killed her. Absolute obedience to the One and the way of life Cassie Bernall knew to be right.

Absolute Obedience

And when Rebekah's parents asked her if she was willing to leave them and travel with a strange man to a strange country a long way away to marry a man she'd never heard of till that day, possibly expecting (even hoping) she would waver and agree with them that she needed more time, she, too, said 'Yes'.¹

¹ Misty Bernall, *She said YES: the unlikely martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* (Robertsbridge, East Sussex: Plough Publishing House, 1999).

Absolute obedience to what she sensed was the will of God.

And centuries later, when an angel confronted Mary, a young woman – younger even than the students at Columbine – living happily in the backwater of Nazareth, about to marry a man she actually knew and maybe even loved, and didn't so much ask as *tell* her she was to be, in human terms, disgraced by having a child before the wedding day, she too said 'Yes'.

Absolute obedience to the will of God, total commitment to an unguessable but frightening future.

Mary was at least more fortunate than Rebekah in knowing the man she was to marry, albeit, as so often happened, he was considerably older. She may even have had some choice in the matter. Rebekah's only choice was to obey a blind instinct – but there could also have been a motivating factor: escape from the family business, the familiar surroundings – a big adventure with a man who was possibly nearer her own age and obviously very wealthy.

But was she a woman before her time in the fact that she *had* a choice? She could have said NO. Abraham had even made provision for that contingency. It was the norm for marriages to be arranged, as they are now in some cultures and the strict, if at the time unwritten Law was that the girl was expected to do as her parents required – a clause eventually written into the Fifth Commandment.

Absolute obedience was also required of this unnamed servant – the anonymous messenger to whom was entrusted a tremendous responsibility. The whole future for God's promise to Abraham lay in his hands. Did he feel the weight of it? Despite the solemn and intimate oath sworn, was he ever tempted to betray his master, and the trust placed in him by Rebekah?

It can't have been an easy assignment, travelling all those miles, loaded with valuables for which he could well have been attacked, all the time worrying as to how he was going to find this special girl.

Only when he reached the well outside Nahor did he settle on a plan. The girls were coming out to get water for the night: the one who would offer water to his camels would be the right one.

She would also be generous, dedicated, hard-working and resilient – for watering one camel would be hard enough given their insatiable thirst and storage capacity, but *ten* ... And there she was – Rebekah. He didn't need to lay out his fleece twice. He knew, Rebekah knew, and even her family knew that he, the servant, was 'blessed of the Lord'. He, too, had exercised absolute obedience.

Beyond their understanding, God neither wanted nor deserved anything else.

Rule Reversal

But by the time of Jesus, when the Jews of His day *were* hide-bound to the law of Moses and all its additives, which in essence really embraced all those norms of nomadic life that had led to Rebekah's big YES, things had begun to change, and not for the better.

Jesus, as we know, would be the first one to see through the strictures of the Law and reinterpret it into a more loving, flexible – and God-centred system, but as He surveyed those around Him He observed the character of the generation in which He lived, and it was no longer centred in absolute obedience to God

Somewhat frustrated by this, He used the illustration of children's games of weddings and funerals, in which girls might take the initiative and play a wedding dance or boys would play a funeral dirge – but instead of responding appropriately to the music, all the other group wants to do was the opposite. Children today, we may observe, are not unique in their perversity.

The rules were being undermined – reversed – and the result was a society becoming resistant to a Law which was totally lacking in love. And even if love should never be equated with a mere doing of one's duty, without love there could be no willing absolute obedience. But Jesus could see their problem as well as their perversity.

'You don't have to carry the huge burden of Law. That's not what God wants. I can show you a law of love that is much easier to bear. Come, and see!'

He wasn't being soft. He was being sensible, pointing them to what really mattered – God's Love, not the harsh requirement of a burdensome Law.

Law – Or Love?

By the time Paul came to wrestle with faith, however, something seems to have regressed. Paul, a Jew, brought up on the strictures of the Law, was having a hard time trying to rid himself of the sense of guilt it laid on him.

'I want to do the right thing but whatever I choose, it seems to go wrong.'

Put another way, according to T. E. Jessop, 'the magnification of sin ... goes with a low conception of virtue'.²

Paul needed rescuing from his concept of the moral Law – and only God could do that.

Perhaps Paul's biggest problem was his own lack of understanding of Love. He had been brought up to be obedient – to the Law, to his instincts and passions to defend it, and now he realized that he was trapped by it at a time when, according to the Gospel of Christ, he should be free of condemnation for sin.

Paul was caught between a choice between what he knew he ought to do, and what he found himself doing. Paul was a long way from learning that real, God-inspired love was the fulfilling of the Law.

Law AND Love

The coming of Jesus was, as He attempted to explain, the *fulfilling* of Law. Perhaps He envisaged – or vainly longed for – a world so filled with love that laws were no longer necessary. Sadly, in our generation, we have seen not a reduction in laws, but an increase. No longer is love the fulfilment of law: love itself has been legalized and legislated for simply because the few continue to live in hatred of all people and situations they see as 'different'.

So what price Love? Many years ago T. E. Jessop called into question whether Jesus was a 'great moral teacher' – for 'In His combative mood it was the moral aristocracy whom He attacked'.³ And 'what moved Him to invective was not badness but goodness'. He was 'blowing sky-high' their treasured notions of morality.

And those who encountered Him, said Jessop, either hated Him or fell in love with Him. But by even the time Jessop wrote (1940) people had become so apathetic that they neither loved or hated

² T. E. Jessop: *Law and Love: A Study of the Christian Ethic* (London: Epworth Press, 1940, 1948).

³ Jessop, *Law and Love*.

Him – and that may perhaps sum up the prevalent attitude today.

But indifference sets limits to Divine Grace. Paul was not indifferent. He had hated Jesus – and through that Jesus could reach Him and transform that hatred into a love which transcended all law and led him in absolute obedience – even to his own death.

When we talk of ‘law’ in the context of Christian discipleship, are we really talking of ‘moral laws’ – those ‘ideals and realities’ that are meant to make us good, and lift us above all we consider ‘bad’ – those ideals that can, and do, manifest themselves in loving actions?

Jessop urges self-criticism, the measuring of our conception of goodness by the teaching of Jesus.

But what if we are then found wanting? ‘Where is the love?’ asks one of those modern raps that sweeps across a panorama of all the ills in the world and pleads for justice.

Can Law *and* Love be compatible – or should we consider some Law of Love, taking away its petty emotional and sexual imagery and replacing it with the requirement of supreme love as demonstrated in Christ’s self-giving on the Cross?

Such love cannot be legislated. It can only be born of a deep knowledge, understanding and love of God in Christ – and such love leads to the desire to be absolutely obedient, to say YES to God in life and death situations, to every new adventure into the unknown, even to the possibility of pain and rejection – ‘all the devil’s weapons of ridicule, disgrace, torture and the threat of death’.³

Obedience not to any duty or legal requirement, but to Love Incarnate.

Attempts to prohibit this kind of love have failed miserably in the past. They still fail today. They always will.

³ Jessop, *Law and Love*.

10th July: 7th after Trinity

THE SOWER

By the Revd Ron Dale
Harrogate

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Hanging on my study wall among some photographs, pictures and memorabilia, is a copy of a Van Gogh

painting called ‘The Sower’ (Would that it was the original!). The picture shows an early morning scene of a lone farmer sowing his seed broadcast; above him is a huge rising sun. There is also a tree that bisects the picture with the sower on one side and a small village on the other.

I’ve had the picture for over thirty years and love it because of the wonderful composition and colours. It speaks to me of many things; that sowing seed can be a lonely job; that seeds need sunshine to germinate; that all his work is done on behalf of other people, symbolized by the village. One unusual facet is that the sower has no facial features, no eyes, nose, mouth or ears. When I first noticed that I puzzled over it because I knew that Van Gogh was expert in depicting the human face; so all I can think is that the artist is saying something like: ‘Here is an anonymous man who cares for his land and community and who symbolizes all the unknown people in the world who help to provide our daily bread.’ And, when I thought about it more the Sower made me realize that all of us are also sowers. We may not be farmers like the sower, but all our words and deeds are like seeds sown in the world, and, what a man sows, that will he also reap.

Turning to the story Jesus told about a sower and his seed, I notice that it is set out in a series of word pictures or images, so let’s take a look at each one and see what it has to say to us.

First, there is the seed that fell on the path and the birds ate it. The seed is the new words about a new way of life in the teaching and preaching of Jesus; His words, yes, but also what He was and did. His words AND deeds. The seed is the power of God being sown in the world to transform it, to make new, and the problem with the first picture is that the seed has not penetrated the ground. It is so easy for the birds to eat it up.

At the end of the parable, Jesus says to the people, ‘The man who has ears to hear should use them’ ... meaning, this needs thinking about, it needs to be turned over and over again in your mind if you are really to get the message, for the penny to drop, for the story to penetrate the depths of the mind and heart.

Image or picture number two is of the seed on shallow ground which the sun scorched to death. The thing to notice here is the sun. Whilst seeds cannot grow and bear fruit without a lot of sunshine, it is also true that the sun can be a destroyer. The sun is

used later in Christian church history as a symbol and sign of persecution; so the meaning could well be that if the teaching of Jesus has not taken deep root in your life, then when trouble comes, **WHEN THE HEAT IS ON**, you will wither and die.

When I look at the different centuries of Church history, I'm amazed at the courage of ordinary people who, when the heat was on, when they were attacked and brutally tortured because they loved Jesus, were prepared to die rather than betray Him. I think of a young thirteen-year-old girl called Agnes who was beheaded; another called Catherine who was tortured on a wheel with spikes (the firework Catherine Wheel was named after her); forty Roman soldiers made to undress and stand in the depths of winter on a freezing pond with warm baths on the shoreline. If they betrayed Jesus they could have a bath and live. Thirty-nine died where they stood and a Roman guard undressed and died with them to keep the number at forty. Or I think of people in our time who suffered persecution, Solzhenitsyn the great Russian man of letters; Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian Christian minister imprisoned without trial for daring to question communism, and suffering many years in solitary confinement rather than betray his Lord. These and many others stood firm 'when the heat was on' and have proved an inspiration to so many Christian people world wide.

The third picture is of seed that fell among thorns. This can stand for anxiety. The worries of this life and love of wealth choke the message.

Jesus taught that so often two things come between us and God. One is anxiety and the other is wealth.

Anxiety. We often worry about many different things: our children and their future; about their education; about our own jobs, health, or the world situation and so on and on. Our minds are often so full of worry that there is no place for God. We forget that he is a Father who really understands and cares deeply for us all. One who even counts the hair on our heads. So it is that dear old St Paul exhorts us to cast all our care upon Him, for He cares for each one of us.

Wealth: I like the story of two South Africans who were haggling over the price of a local farm that was for sale. The owner wanted a lot more than the prospective buyer was prepared to pay, so no sale took place.

Unknown to both of them, under their very feet were the very richest deposits of gold in all the world. There was something under their feet far more valuable than an old broken down farm, but it never occurred to the two men to look for it ... So with God and His Kingdom, hidden in the world, but always found by those who really hear the message and search for Him. I remember that John D. Rockefeller in his lifetime gave away a hundred and fifty million pounds and said on one occasion 'The poorest man is the man who has nothing but money'.

And so to the final picture or image, that of the good soil and the amazing harvest. This last picture is full of assurance for the Church, for it reveals that with the coming of Jesus the seeds of God's Kingdom have not only been planted, but will in the end bear a marvellous harvest, well beyond our wildest dreams. In spite of everything, the Kingdom of God comes and therefore His kingly rule will be acknowledged universally when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

There are many different ways in which this parable can be interpreted, but in the end it does two things:

One. It is a parable of encouragement for all God's people. It says that in spite of many disappointments and setbacks in doing his work through the Church in the world, there will be a reward, a harvest.

Dr Colin Morris, past missionary in Africa and former President of the Methodist Conference found the truth of this in Africa on one occasion. He was on a visit to a remote village in the Zambezi valley where an old friend had laboured for years to preach and teach the Gospel. He had returned home to England and had not been replaced, so his work had seemingly died out. He had only three converts to show for all his labours. One had died, one became a minister and moved on and the other had reverted to paganism. But to his intense surprise, Dr Morris found a thriving Church and village with a choir practice ringing in his ears as he arrived.

Colin Morris asks the question of how the constant renewal of the church could be explained, because when other faiths die, they die for good. There can be only one explanation and that is always when God is written off and buried in a tomb, He always breaks the bands of death and brings new life out of death.

Two. The parable of the Sower is also a reminder to those who hear the Good News of God's love in Jesus that there is a great responsibility laid upon them: they must think deeply about Jesus and his message and commit themselves to Him and His message. There is nothing wrong with the seed, it will always bear amazing fruit in any human heart that will allow it to.

17th July: 8th after Trinity

FIGS FROM THISTLES

By the Revd Canon Marilyn McCord Adams

Genesis 28:10–19a; Psalm 139; Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

Human life as we know it is a mixture of good and bad, of virtue and vice, of faithfulness and treachery, of fruitfulness and abortion, of creativity – fostered, forfeited, perverted. Surely God must be *for* the good and *against* the bad. Surely God acts to guarantee the triumph of good over evil. Yet, God's ways are higher than our ways. Even biblical authors frame different pictures of how Divine providence proceeds, of how Divine purpose prevails.

In Matthew's Gospel, parable interpretations draw on standard apocalyptic theology, which locates the division between good and bad on the outside. Like grade-B movies, the world is peopled by one-dimensional characters. Conflicts pit 'good guys' against 'bad guys', tighten plot tension by letting the latter prevail for 'a time and a time and half a time' until all seems lost. Then, at the last minute, after it's already too late, *Deus ex machina!* God will segregate and quarantine, torment and destroy the wicked, while the righteous will enter into bliss and shine like the sun!

As a word to the oppressed in harsh times (e.g., to Jews under Antiochus Epiphanes or Adolf Hitler, to terrorized villages in Dafur, to sexually harassed employees and children abused by their parents), apocalyptic could sound like Good News. It fits certain facts of experience. It acknowledges how wicked, how indecent it is to treat human beings in such a fashion. It admits that – from the point of view of human endurance – Divine rescue is delayed far too long. In response, it appeals to mystery: God intervenes at the *right* time, but God's plans are

beyond our comprehension. It adds that YHWH God of armies gets more glory by waiting until the worst has already happened – until the enemy has fired its most impressive weapons – before stepping in to turn the situation around. Jesus waits until Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days – the Father lets crucifixion proceed – and then raises the dead!

Apocalyptic theology aims to cheer-lead the elect into holding on a little longer. To work, its rhetoric has to cover up what everybody knows: life throws people up against the wall, tests them beyond their capacity to stand it. The notion that God permits more torment to open wider space to strut His stuff, caricatures God into a cruel ego-maniac. Apocalyptic appeal to mystery seems incredible given its otherwise simplistic analysis: if good and evil are so easily separated at the end, why not amputate sooner, cut off the devilish hand, pluck out the offending eye, take Hitler out with a miraculous brain aneurism, before they do so much harm?

Jesus' parable of the weeds is intended to supply a complicating answer. 'All the world is God's own field.' God sows only good seed (sons of the kingdom), but an enemy (the devil) sows evil seed. 'Wheat and tares together sown' become so entangled in their root structures, that it would be impossible to extirpate one without the other. The point is not that growing up alongside bad guys will put good guys to the test and enable them to bear the heroic fruit of martyrdom. Rather, the parable implies, the farmer does not clear the whole field, because he wants to give the wheat its chance to produce its ordinary crop – wheat!

The parable of the weeds acknowledges how God's purposes have always been social. God's covenant with Israel was sealed with curses and promises, reinforced with cautions against neglecting the poor, shedding blood, and worshipping the work of their own hands. Strands of prophetic theology offer the diagnosis: it is because these warnings went unheeded that God whistled for some big power to tromp through, rape and conquer, scorch and burn, send the people into exile. *Warfare, collective punishment is a blunt instrument.* It destroys pious women and little children, honest labourers and conscientious leaders along with pimps, extortionists, self-serving kings, and corrupt corporate executives. Jesus' parable assures, the kingdom of heaven will not come this way; not this time. The social fabric on which good and bad alike

rely will be preserved. Separating the good from the bad awaits the harvest, when a new world order will close the age.

The story of Jacob digs down deeper. It acknowledges what experience teaches: *wheat and tares are sown together in every human heart*. From his mother's womb, Jacob is a wrestler and supplanter, a trixter, ready, willing, and able to do what it takes to get what belonged to somebody else. In the episodes just before his ladder-dream, Jacob has cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and stolen their father's death-bed blessing, provoking Esau to fratricidal plots. Worse yet, Jacob has committed the then capital offences of lying to his ancient-of-days father and taking YHWH's name in vain – insisting to Isaac that he is Esau, back from the hunt so quickly because God granted him success! Exile in his mother's country, indentured service to Laban does not occasion repentance and reform, but sees Jacob entering into his own. Tricked and out-tricking his father-in-law uncle, Jacob becomes rich in livestock and offspring. Even when he returns to the fatherland, Jacob continues to play favourites – so preferring Rachel and her children as to provoke Leah's boys to murderous jealousy, so mourning for Joseph and coddling Benjamin that he refuses to appreciate and enjoy the sons who are always with him. And so the sins of the fathers and mothers begin to descend!

Yet, *blessing trumps blasphemy*. Fresh from his crimes, Jacob is fleeing for his life. But Jacob *did* get the blessing. God meets him in a dream to make the covenant official, to seal the deal. In what follows, Divine providence is opportunistic, uses acted-out character faults as much as personal strengths, tares as much as wheat, to forward the plot. Jacob's sins of theft and filial impiety move him back to Haran; Laban's trickery gets Jacob married and reproducing the promised descendants, as many as the stars. Jacob's partiality turns Joseph into a spoiled brat. But his brothers' hatred sells Joseph down to Egypt where his gifts of dreams and administration put him in a position to save the lives of many, not least the Leah-tribe of Judah from which Messiah was born, the One through whom all the nations bless themselves!

Matthew's Gospel celebrates the same providential irony. The religious establishment denounces Jesus as a false prophet. But in getting the Romans to flog and crucify Him, they make His three-fold passion predictions come true. Egging Pilate on, calling down Jesus' blood on their heads, the whole congregation

of Israel brings on the sacrifice that pays its ransom, that releases, allows them to be sprinkled with the blood of purification. Matthew's God uses our disastrously wrong-headed discernment, the very worst that we can suffer, be, or do – even when we mistake God's Messiah for a son of the devil, even when the people of God kill God – to accomplish the world's salvation!

The God of apocalyptic theology is aloof, enthroned in heaven, surrounded by crystal sea and court flattery, while angels blow trumpets, unleash plagues, unravel the cosmos, so defile the ground with horrendous slaughter that God has to start over with a new heaven and a new earth. Surely daily experience proves, drastic changes will be needed, our own hearts dramatically converted, if we are to arrive at the fatherland in peace.

Yet, Jacob's ladder-dream, Matthew's Gospel insist, *blessing trumps blasphemy in the meantime, because God is not aloof but Emmanuel, God with us, God keeping us wherever we go*. What made Jacob, the twelve disciples, Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate somebodies rather than nobodies is that God claimed their lives as the stuff of Divine purpose. Likewise, whether we are striding forth in the power of the Spirit or have gone perversely off course, whether we enjoy good working relations or are caught in the gears of dysfunctional institutions, we can have confidence that neither we nor our tormenters are out of control, because nothing can snatch us from God's hand!

24th July: 9th after Trinity

NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US . . .

*By the Revd Dr Chris Knights
Scotswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne*

Romans 8:36–39

Not long after we came back to the north-east from Sussex, which was in 1994, I, my wife, my son and my daughter went one day to the large department store in Hexham. Our daughter was, I guess, about four at the time, and it wasn't very long before Christmas, so we spent most of our time in the large toy department.

My wife and I were in different aisles, and each of us thought that the other had charge of our daughter.

That is, until we met up again – when we realized, to our horror, that neither of us had her with us, that she had become separated from us, that we had lost our daughter.

Well, of course, we started flying round the store, desperately searching for her. I can well remember switching off from everything and everyone else as, panic-stricken, we hunted up and down each and every aisle – until I finally realized that the shop's instore tannoy system was loudly announcing that the customer service desk had charge of a small girl in a certain-coloured cardigan and would her parents kindly like to come and collect her, as she wasn't very happy at being on her own and was crying her eyes out.

Have you ever wondered why it is that when you are in a panic you completely forget where things are? Initially, we had absolutely no recollection whatsoever of the location of the customer service desk! But soon we tracked down the desk and one little, lost, miserable girl.

Even now, I think I would be hard put to say who was the most relieved at that moment of reunion at the end of the separation, who ran faster towards the other, my daughter, or my wife, her mother, who was ahead of me.

In the end, I guess that our daughter's separation from the rest of us can only have lasted a matter of a few minutes, but it was distressing, both for my wife and me, and for our daughter herself, and those few minutes felt like an eternity.

Of course, I know full well that there are occasions – reported in the news oh so-frequently – when a child gets separated from its parents, and *isn't* found again quickly, or at all, or alive. And I cannot even begin to imagine what that must feel like – either for the child itself or for its parents and siblings. And such cases always call for our earnest prayers.

But I want this morning to make what is actually a fairly small leap from that realization that young children *can* get separated from their parents, sometimes tragically permanently, to the claim made by St Paul, in our reading from Romans 8, that *nothing* can separate *us* from the love of God in Jesus.

The words are quite well-known:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these

things are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing can separate us from God our heavenly Father's love for us. That's quite a claim. It takes quite a bit of faith to believe it – but, if it is true, and I for one believe that it is, then it is the most incredible good news that there is. Nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus. None of the trials and tribulations of life, none of our sin, none of our turning away or running away from God, none of our desire to do our own thing, none of our selfishness, not even death itself, is stronger than the love that God has for each and every one of us.

It's almost as if there is between each one of us and God one of those safety straps that you often see parents these days using with toddlers. You know the things I mean: with Velcro one end fixes round the wrist of the child and the other end fixes round the wrist of the parent, thus making sure that the child can't run away and get lost.

I think there's something similar between each one of us and God, and that that safety strap is actually God's love for us. And it is unbreakable. It may be a very long strap – perhaps like an extending dog lead – because God does give us freedom, but it is there, and it means that God won't let us get irretrievably lost from Him – He loves us too much to let us do that!

It also means that we should always be able to find the way back to God if we feel that we've wandered too far away from Him – we just have to follow the strap! And it also means that sometimes God might give a tug on the strap, and draw us back towards Him, and rein us in a bit.

Perhaps we can see the sacrament of Holy Baptism as a connecting of that safety strap of God's love between God and whoever's being baptized. And once the strap is connected, it can't be broken. Nothing will be able to separate the baptized from God's love for them in Jesus.

So, a question for you. Have you let that safety strap between you and God your heavenly Father, that safety strap that is God's love for you, uniquely, personally, individually, have you let that strap get a

bit too long, have you wandered a bit too far away from your Father, and shouldn't you be shortening the strap a bit, and getting back a bit closer to Him? Because where He is is the best place to be, both here and hereafter.

And if you feel that the trials and tribulations and pressures of life are conspiring to put a great gap between you and your heavenly Father, don't despair – for that safety strap is still fixed at one end round your wrist and at the other round God's, and it is unbreakable, because it's made of God's love – and nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

31st July: 10th after Trinity

A WRESTLING GOD

*By the Revd Peter Chase
Hartley, Plymouth*

Genesis 32:22–31

See! – A solitary figure beside the stream. It is so dark, you say, you cannot make out who it is? Much is obscure, but *that* we do know. It is Jacob. He has been transporting his flocks and herds and camels and donkeys across the Jabbok and has just delivered, by night, his wives and maids and children too.

Jacob left these parts twenty years ago, after swindling his brother Esau out of his father's blessing. But now he must come home. Otherwise the blessing cannot operate. He must return to the Promised Land for 'the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine'. But also, so that Israel may get going on her destiny: 'Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you ... blessed be everyone who blesses you' (Gen 27:28–29). Isaac's blessing upon Jacob also said 'Be Lord over your brothers'. This can hardly have pleased Esau. The challenge and risk of coming home is that Jacob must face Esau. Esau is coming to meet Jacob – as we speak – with four hundred men (32:6). Jacob has divided his people and beasts into two companies so that if one is attacked the other may escape (7). He has sent presents ahead to appease Esau (13). He has even prayed! (9–12). Now, alone, he waits.

It is so dark that we cannot even be sure which side of the stream Jacob is on. We are told in verse

23: 'He took [his family] and sent them across the stream'. If Jacob *took* them and stayed on the far side of the Jabbok – Esau's side – then we are witnessing a brave man's solitary time of preparation (comparable to Jesus' in the wilderness). If on the other hand he *sent* them over, or took them across but then returned, then what we are looking at is Jacob skulking on the safe side of the stream. Will he ever get definitively across? Or will he run away from Esau? The Jabbok is his Rubicon! Is Jacob up to the challenge? The future of Israel hangs upon the outcome.

What is happening now? Someone has appeared – it looks like a man (24). He has set upon Jacob. The two are wrestling. It is dark (as I have mentioned before) but they are kicking up so much dust [the Hebrew words for 'wrestled' and 'dust' are similar] that we would be hard put to it anyway to tell who is doing what to whom.

The situation is confused and ambiguous. And – this is the genius of the story – the ambiguities are not resolved. Yet through the dust-cloud and the darkness some clear key sentences do reach us on the breeze. By daybreak we know that Jacob has achieved some sort of decisive victory. Verse 24 identifies Jacob's assailant as 'a man'. Jacob probably assumed it was Esau, unable to wait till morning to beat him to a pulp. But the 'man' did not feel or smell like Esau – and as the fight wore on Jacob began to think that he was wrestling with a *super*-human being. Most interpreters in Judaism look into the dust-cloud and see Jacob wrestling with Esau's guardian angel. Battles are often decided on the night before they occur. If Jacob had defeated Esau's angel that night it would explain why on the morrow Esau was conciliatory. The wrestling could be literal fact. It might also be metaphorical – a dust-cloud in Jacob's head as he overcomes his fear of Esau.

In Jewish interpretation 'Esau' became the symbol of hostile Gentile empires, such as Rome. Such empires *would* set upon Israel, but Israel must always hang on, against the odds, and eventually wring a blessing from the situation. A poem by Randall Jarrell notes that the Roman Empire is now just picturesque ruins but a lively Jewish community still exists in Rome!

Is it appropriate that the Evil Empire's angel seems to need to flee from daylight? Not necessarily. Angels, like lawyers, must not be judged evil because their clients are dubious. Jewish tradition has another

explanation for the angel's swift departure. After waiting millennia for the chance, he has been given a place in the heavenly choir. His debut aloft is at Morning Prayer, any minute now. He must not miss it. Because he has blessed Israel, establishing a positive Gentile approach to Jews, he now deserves to join the heavenly choir.

Verse 24 calls the assailant 'a man' but verse 30 suggests Jacob has seen God. Most people peering into the dark scene have chosen to 'split the difference' or 'aim in between' – and have seen an angel. The prophet Hosea set the pattern (12: 3b–4a): 'In his manhood he (Jacob) strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed ...'

It need not be Esau's guardian angel. Indeed a less partial angel would be better to do what was necessary for Jacob that night. If Jacob was on the brave man's side of the stream, what he needed was a brisk 'work out' before facing Esau. If he was on the coward's side, he needed a sharp kick in the right direction.

It may well be an angel. The vocabulary of the passage allows it. The word used for God – 'Elohim' – can also mean 'divine beings'. But why are we attracted to this explanation? It seems to preserve God's dignity if it is just an angel who brawls with Jacob. And, of course, the angel gets beaten – Jacob prevails. Surely God, by definition, cannot lose? But ... is it really much better if his angelic emissary is defeated? As I look into the dust-cloud in the darkness I believe I see God. The vocabulary allows me to do so: 'Elohim' or 'El' can mean 'God'. In primitive times anyone wanting to cross a river had to fight the god of that river first. The writers of Genesis did not believe in such gods. No more did Jacob. There was just one God – 'The Lord'. But when we cast the primitive story aside we should be careful what assumptions we make about the Lord. I do not believe he is too dignified to weigh in and do what is necessary for his children.

What is necessary for Jacob is to bring out his potential. In the struggle he retains his customary quick-wittedness but adds valour and perseverance. Under attack he hangs on in there – even when

wounded. When his assailant seeks to withdraw he insists upon a blessing. In the course of the struggle he becomes 'Israel' – a suitable father for his people. Angels need not be bashful about giving their names but the name that is surrounded by extreme reticence is God's. What can the assailant's blessing usefully be but God's own endorsement of Isaac's blessing – his agreement that Jacob is the right man to lead Israel? If the person slipping away before daybreak is God, this would be an act of mercy. Jacob has indeed 'seen God face to face' (30) but only under cover of darkness. More light might have proved fatal. The story thrusts forward from the assailant as 'man' to the assailant as 'God'. An angel would be an anti-climax.

But is this how God behaves? Jacob might have hoped for comfort. Instead God attacks him. Yet this is just what Jacob needs to bring out the best in him, to make him 'Israel'. 'Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts' (Prov 27:6)! How, though, does Jacob manage to prevail?

How can he beat God? The situation is a test. Will Jacob meet the challenge? God does not deploy all the power he has. Just all the power needed to release the best in Jacob. In such circumstances God is pleased when Jacob 'wins'.

Acting the role of *agent provocateur* God is delighted to be 'defeated'. Jacob does not wrestle with a river god. But as we turn away in theological sophistication from such ideas let us not relegate God to aloofness and dignity and always acting through inter-mediaries. Surely God gets stuck in, personally, for our sake.

We look for the last time at the wrestlers in the dust-cloud. The identity of the assailant remains open. You will see whomsoever it is you see – and that is fine. It could be 'a man'. Perhaps Jacob fought off a mugger and decided 'I am stronger than I thought. I can deal with Esau'. It could be an angel. It could be God.

What comes to us clearly on the breeze in any of these cases is that Jacob hung on and received divine blessing. He showed he was up to the job. Indeed it was probably in the very process of wrestling that he *became* up to the job of being Israel.