

Reading Genesis: Jacob Wrestling (Genesis 32. 22-32)

Sarah Bachelard and Neil Millar

We come tonight to the last of our series 'Reading Genesis' – and we finish (appropriately, don't you think?) with the story of Jacob wrestling a blessing. This story has been profoundly significant at a couple of junctures in my life and it's one that Neil and I have several times pondered together. What follows is the fruit of that joint reflection.

So we come again to Jacob – Jacob the wily heel-grabber, ever afraid of missing out, determined to be number one. Jacob – a man who's life has been a series of dodgy deceptions and swindles. Jacob the wrestler... the patriarch... the Father of Israel.

When we meet him here, Jacob is afraid. As most of us discover when we deceive others, particularly those close to us, it eventually catches up with us. Jacob had stolen his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. And ever since has been trying to avoid him. But now these two brothers are on a collision course. In hours they will meet, and Jacob is afraid. How will the impetuous Esau respond, what will Esau do to him?

Ever the schemer, Jacob has done his best here to smooth troubled waters; sending wave after wave of gifts to placate his brother. As this day draws to a close, Jacob and his retinue arrive at the ford of Jabbok. They cross, and having settled his family there presumably as a last line of defence, Jacob crosses back. And, says the text, he was left alone.

When Jacob stole his father's blessing, he was aided and abetted by his mother; he covered himself with skins. But this night, blessing will come

through uncovering and stripping, in solitude and darkness. Jacob has spent his life trying to acquire things, trying to get one over those around him – this night, he divests himself of ‘everything that he had’. It’s a moment many of us know – a moment of reckoning. There are no more defences, no more distractions, no more excuses. It is night ... we are alone ... it’s time to face up... It’s a terrifying place to be. In this place, Jacob finds himself in the struggle of his life. *‘And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.’*

He was expecting his brother, but here was an encounter that Jacob hadn’t bargained for. But who is this shadowy antagonist and where did he come from? Was Jacob fighting with part of himself – maybe his shadow, maybe his true self striving to get free? Was this simply an inner struggle— one of those difficult and sleepless nights? Or was someone else present – a demon, an angel, God?

We don’t know; it’s dark, we can’t fully see. Later, Jacob speaks of him as God, but we’re never actually told. Perhaps it doesn’t matter. Maybe we’re not meant to know so it can be any or all of these. Whoever he is, he can no longer be avoided.

It appears that the combatants were evenly matched. This is interesting if it *is* God with whom Jacob is fighting, for surely God could have crushed him? Perhaps in this kind of confrontation, the real purpose has nothing to do with winning or losing. Perhaps the struggle itself is the point. In his poem ‘The Man Watching’, inspired by this story, Rilke concludes: ‘Winning does not tempt that man; This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings’. And so they wrestle on, for the *whole* of the night. And when his rival saw that he did not prevail he struck Jacob on the hip socket putting it out of joint. A decisive blow, you’d think, but no, the ever-desperate and determined Jacob will not give up. *‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’*

Now, of course, we know this is what Jacob says, but have you ever wondered why? Whatever possessed Jacob to think there might be a blessing in this assault and struggle? I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know that in many biblical stories and historical myths this profound truth is revealed. I think of Dante in the Inferno and of Odysseus on his long agonising struggle back to Ithaca. I think of the Syrophonecian woman in Mark's gospel who refused to accept no from Jesus when she sought healing for her sick daughter. I think too of my own experience. It is true there as well, that which at first I felt to be a terrible failure or betrayal in my life, indeed, the end of my life eventually broke open in blessing, though not without a long and difficult struggle.

Jacob will not let go of his assailant until he receives a blessing. It's a gutsy stance from a man who must be exhausted by this stage and who needs strength surely for the confrontation still to come – with his slighted brother Esau. Mind you, Jacob is used to hanging on. Ever since his birth he's been hanging on for a blessing. Well, if Jacob is undaunted in his demand, neither is his antagonist who asks: 'What is your name?'

And here there is some more confrontation, more stripping to be undergone. For Jacob must acknowledge who he is and has been. 'What is your name?' the man asks him. Jacob, he says and ain't that the truth! His name means 'heel-grabber,' 'deceiver,' 'crooked one,' and that is exactly how he has lived. For Jacob, the revealing of his name is as much a confession as a conveying of information. Ironically, in giving his name 'deceiver', he is being totally honest. And to this confession, and perhaps only because of it, the man replies, '*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, but simply by hanging on – refusing to run away from whatever this reality is and what it shows him

about himself. Is it that he knows that only through this struggle can he come home – to himself, to his land, to his brother? And unlike his old way of being, this new identity is not one that Jacob controls or manipulates. Jacob is known, seen, called into something new by his protagonist; but Jacob is not to know him. ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ Jacob is blessed by a reality bigger than he is; Jacob the deceiver becomes Israel the chosen of God through an encounter he never masters.

And here, in this intriguing story we get perhaps our best insight into the true nature of blessing. For a blessing is not necessarily a comfortable or consoling gift. It is much more than sweet words and gentle Celtic breezes. When Jacob was blessed he was given an insight into who he truly was and into what his life was truly to be about. That, it appears, is the heart of what it means to be blessed. But this gift was given at the end of a demanding, exhausting and even terrifying struggle, just because it asks that we take off our masks, strip away identities that maybe have worked for us up till now but are not big enough for us anymore, or for God’s vision of us.

To receive the blessing of the identity we have in God might mean a painful process of uncovering the truth. It might mean accepting a wound at the same time. In the old Greek stories, the touch of a God was always experienced as both violation and blessing. When at the end of that long night the sun rises, Jacob goes on, limping. But he limps into an unimaginably different future. The story continues: ‘Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him ...’ And ‘Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept’ (Gen 33). Blessing promises reconciliation with ourselves, with God and with one another. May we too have the courage to receive our blessing from God. Our truer life and all that goes with it.

In this story, Jacob is blessed with a new name. But more than that it's what this name signified in the unfolding of his true vocation. Instead of stealing blessing through guile and deception – the old 'Jacob' way, he is to be the father of a nation (Israel) that will be for the blessing of the whole world (cf. Gen 12:1-3), and this is fulfilled in the 'Israel' way (by striving intimately with God). When Jacob was blessed he was given an insight into who he truly was and into what his life was truly to be about. That, it appears, is the heart of what it means to be blessed.

In this sense we bless someone whenever we name some aspect of who they truly are, whenever we give some affirmation, some encouragement, some insight into their vocation—their true purpose in life. Consciously and unconsciously, formally and informally parents and grandparents can do this for children, teachers for their students, ministers for their congregations, bosses for their workers, leaders for their teams, and so on.

At this point, I have just been struck on the hip (in the gut!), a reminder that my true vocation is not to preach this sermon but rather to struggle on through this night with my assailant in order to 'receive' my true name and way of being that will come with the break of day. Stay tuned...

But I think we have seen enough to glimpse that blessing is not necessarily a comfortable or consoling gift. It is not all about gentle Celtic breezes. Blessing, encountering God, is demanding and exhausting and even at times terrifying, just because it asks of us everything; it asks that we take off our masks, strip away identities that maybe have always worked for us but that are not big enough for us anymore, or for God's vision of us.

I said at the beginning that in the creation story, *life* is what happens in encounter with God. In Jacob's story we see that the blessing of truer and fuller life might be bestowed only through struggle, only through the stripping away of what is not ultimately life-giving. Whether our truer being is covered over by our own refusals and fears; whether it has been covered over by the demands, the inattention or the projections of others, to receive the blessing of the identity we have in God might mean a painful process of uncovering the truth. It might mean accepting a wound at the same time. When at the end of the long night the sun rises, Jacob goes on, limping. But he limps into an unimaginably different future. The story continues: 'Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming ... Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept' (Gen 33). Blessing promises life and creativity and surprise. Blessing promises reconciliation with ourselves, with God and with one another. May we not fear to receive the blessing of our truer life from God.