

Reading Genesis: Jacob's Ladder (Genesis 28. 10-19)

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Last week, as you know, I was in central Australia participating in a conference called 'Edge of the Sacred'. It's not a bad description of where Jacob finds himself in our reading tonight – on the 'edge' of the sacred, in the strange and liminal place where earth unexpectedly touches heaven, heaven touches earth.

Jacob dreams his remarkable dream as he departs his father Isaac's house. Ostensibly he is going away to find a wife in Paddan-aram; conveniently he is also escaping his elder brother Esau's wrath. Remember he has deceived Isaac into bestowing the blessing meant for Esau on himself. He needs to get away, fast, and his mother Rebekah engineers the excuse. Jacob is instructed not to take a wife from among the Canaanites, but from the family's ancestral homeland and extended kin. On this face-saving pretext, off Jacob went, 'came to a certain place and stayed there for the night'.

Archaeological evidence, so the scholars say, indicate that this place, which Jacob will later call 'Bethel', had been a cultic site for the Canaanites for centuries. But in the Genesis story, 'this pagan background ... is entirely [passed over]: the site is [spoken of as] no more than an anonymous "place" where Jacob decides to spend the night'.¹ This is interesting since, as we have been discovering, no detail is irrelevant in these finely wrought Genesis stories.

Significantly, the word 'place' occurs six times in this brief passage; 'he came to a certain place', he 'lay down in that place'; when Jacob woke he said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place', 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'. And so on. Place, place, place. Robert Alter

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 148.

suggests that in part, then, ‘this is the tale of the transformation of an anonymous place *through vision* into Bethel, [which means] a “house of God”’.² It’s a tale about recognising God as present – here.

This, for me, raises the issue of the relationship between the particular and the universal, between somewhere and everywhere as the site of our encounters with God. God is the Creator, so we say, of heaven and earth; there is no place that God is not. ‘If I ascend to heaven’, writes the psalmist, ‘you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast’ (Ps. 139. 8-9). We do not have to go anywhere in particular to be with God, because God is everywhere.

And yet – there is a paradox. Celtic spirituality speaks of ‘thin places’, places where the veil between heaven and earth is transparent, where the divine breaks through more clearly into mundane experience. The whole creation is infused with the Spirit of God, but that is more evident in some places than others. Aboriginal spirituality has this same awareness. All land is sacred; all is infused with Spirit and story. But there are particular sacred sites which invite particular awareness. And the same thing happens in our experience of time. All time belongs to God – the whole of our lives can be prayer. Yet our sense of the sacredness of *all* time requires there to be *particular* times – the time of our meditation, for example – where we give our time completely to God. Otherwise ‘everywhere’ too readily collapses into ‘nowhere’, and ‘always’ collapses into ‘never’.

So it is that in *this* place and *this* time, Jacob encounters God in his dream. What does this experience of God consist in? ‘[H]e dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it’. The Lord stood beside him or above the ladder (depending on the translation) and reiterated the promise made to Abraham and Isaac, the promise concerning land and descendants and blessing. What Jacob

² Alter, *Genesis*, 148.

encounters, he says, is the 'gate' of heaven, heaven opened to earth, with God's messengers traversing the space between.

Significantly for us, this is precisely the image that, according to the writer of John's gospel, Jesus uses the very first time he identifies himself. Jesus is speaking to Nathanael, a somewhat sceptical recruit to discipleship (he's the one who asked, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'). When Nathanael is won over and acknowledges Jesus as 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel', Jesus says to him: 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' (John 1.51). Notice now there is no more ladder; now it is Jesus himself who has become the ladder, the communication and means of connection between God and humanity: 'you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'.

In fact, this theme of the opened heaven runs through the whole New Testament witness – from the stories of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan where 'the heavens opened over him', to the vision of Stephen as he is stoned, 'Behold I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7.56), through to the Book of Revelation where we are given the vision of the 'new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Rev. 21. 2).³ James Alison says the language of the 'open heaven' is a way of speaking about 'making accessible ... the Father'. We might understand it in terms of the bringing together, the union, of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus and, through him, in ourselves. Yet, as our story shows, this notion of the 'open heaven', of God breaking through into human experience is not confined to the New Testament. The Father of Jesus Christ is the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has ever sought our joining in the divine life and blessing of creation.

So what might all this have to say to us? I'm thinking both of the way the story highlights the significance of place and particularity for divine-human encounter, and of Jacob's vision of the open heaven. We live in an age when the institutional 'home'

³ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 78-80.

of the sacred in western culture is in rapid decline. The sacred sites of our churches are increasingly empty, somehow failing to mediate the experience of the presence of the living God. And we live in an age where, as philosopher Charles Taylor has pointed out, the secular has all but occluded any sense of a transcendent reality which encompasses and may transfigure our vision and experience of mundane life. There is little sense of there being a reality other than this one, an open heaven inviting us to see our world in its light.

These were the themes we were exploring at the conference 'Edge of the Sacred'. Not in a panicked, 'how do we save the institution?' kind of way, but seeking to acknowledge the truth of where we find ourselves and to be in the liminal space between one thing and the next. Like Jacob – having left his father's house and not yet arrived at where he is going – we too are leaving behind a long-established Christian culture and way of communicating God, and have not yet arrived at whatever our next dwelling place and language might be. That's OK, *and* it raises for us the question of what faithfulness means at this time.

I believe that we may encounter God anywhere, *and* that we need particular places and times that intensify and focus the possibility of that encounter. I believe that our lives are already encompassed by transcendent reality, *and* that we need persons and communities whose have let their lives be transformed by this reality to make it visible and accessible to others. And I believe this is what a community like ours has a vocation to be – a community of practice that witnesses to the open heaven, holding wide the gate and learning to let its own life be transfigured by the encounter. Jacob's story, I said before, is 'the tale of the transformation of an anonymous place through vision into Bethel, [which means] a "house of God"'. That's a vision worth having, a dream worth dreaming – don't you think?