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On Blessing II – Genesis 32.22-32

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‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me’ (Gen. 32.26). Benedictus, as I said last week, means blessed and in the readings and reflections these first weeks of our gathering we are exploring what blessing is. What does it mean to be blessed, to be a source of blessing?

Last week, I said that blessing is always to do with encountering and being encountered by ultimate reality, by God. Our reading was from Genesis 1, the story of creation – here the reality of God encounters chaos and darkness and calls forth life and light. In this story, *life* is what happens in encounter with God; and this means that life itself is blessing. The story of creation teaches us to receive our lives as blessing and gift, and to realise that from our life more life can come. Blessing, I said, promises creativity and surprise.

The story we have just heard has a darker edge. Here blessing is not simply given, but wrestled through struggle and darkness; blessing is not only life but also wounding. How do we make sense of that?

An earlier episode in Jacob’s life gives us some essential context for reading this story. Jacob and his brother Esau enjoyed a kind of sibling rivalry from hell – they were twins who fought in their mother’s womb – so much so that she voices her despair with the question ‘If it is to be this way, why do I live?’ (Gen 25.22). At least, that is the polite translation; the Hebrew is more telling: ‘the children clashed together within her, and she said, “Then why me?”’¹ Esau was born first, but Jacob followed closely, grasping his heel, and this beginning is reflected in his name which means ‘he supplants’ or ‘he who acts crookedly’ (a clue here).

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996), 127.

In the tale of these two brothers, there is more than one episode of supplanting but the one that concerns us now is Jacob's theft of the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau as first-born. As their father Isaac neared the end of his life, and with the help of his mother, Jacob deceived Isaac into thinking that he was Esau. Though Esau was 'an hairy man' and Jacob a 'smooth man', he covered his hands and neck with animal hide so that his blind father mistook his identity. In this way, he stole the blessing that Isaac meant for Esau – and once the blessing had been handed over, there was no calling it back. Esau says to Isaac: 'have you not reserved a blessing for me?' and Isaac unhappily replies: 'I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants ... What then can I do for you, my son?' (Gen 27.36-37)

Jacob must then flee from Esau's anger, and he spends twenty years in a foreign land, acquiring in the meantime wives and children and flocks and great wealth. But then God calls him to return to the land of his birth, the land where he will encounter Esau again. And this is where our reading begins – Jacob journeying towards Esau, deeply uneasy, afraid that he and his household will be killed, yet trying to trust God's promise that his good, his blessing, is intended.

On this night, it is as if he knows there is a confrontation coming, something to be faced. He gets up, takes his household and crosses the ford of the Jabbok. He sends them on ahead, 'and likewise everything that he had'. Then, says the text, 'Jacob was left alone'. When Jacob steals his father's blessing, he is aided and abetted by his mother; he covers 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'. The precondition of this blessing is openness and vulnerability – and since his life and identity has been grasped and seized, the necessary first step is a letting go, becoming naked again.

Without warning or explanation the struggle begins: a man wrestles with Jacob until daybreak, the text tells us. Who is this man? Later the story implies that it might have been God – at least an angel – but he does not give his name. Is it God? Is it God encountered through the part of Jacob that is unreconciled with himself, his deepest fear, his remorse, his shadow?; or is it his true self, struggling to break free from the web of deception and self-aggrandisement with which he has cloaked his life? Who is this man who overpowers Jacob in the dark on the eve of his return to the land of his birth, his likely death at the hands of the brother he has betrayed? Whoever he is, he can no longer be run from or avoided. And at last Jacob himself is willing to be there to the end: ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’.

What is the blessing Jacob receives? It is, it turns out, a name, an identity. But first there is some more stripping to be done. For Jacob must acknowledge who he is and has been. ‘What is your name?’ the man asks him. Jacob, he says – deceiver. Then said the man, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel’. The great translator of Genesis, Robert Alter has written: ‘Abraham’s change of name was a mere rhetorical flourish compared to this one, for of all the patriarchs Jacob is the one whose life is entangled in moral ambiguities ... [The resonance of the change is this]: “It will no longer be said that the blessings came to you through deviousness ... but instead through lordliness ... and openness”’.²

Jacob prevails here, not by overcoming the man or by besting him, but simply by hanging on – refusing to run away again from whatever this reality is. 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 the man who wrestles with him; 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.

² Alter, *Genesis*, 182.

There is a depth and mystery to this story that feels pretty much endless – it is one of those episodes in the Old Testament literature which puts us in touch with primal truth. We have barely scratched its surface. 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.