

Sermon for St Botolph's Church. 12 July 2020.

Genesis 28. 10-end (Jacob's Ladder).

It is great to be back in this old church, which has been a focus for the people of God in this place for at least 700 years. The last few months have been a great shock to us all, not least the realisation that, with all the panoply of our modern technology and resources, humankind can still be at the mercy of mother nature. Slowly things are creeping back towards normality – I've managed to get a haircut this week and we can join together in worship in church. But there's still a long way to go – I, for one, find worship without singing a glass only half full. This, we are told, is the 'new normal' (what a dreadful phrase) with social distancing and extra cleanliness and the avoidance of anything that might project virus-laden aerosol particles, and anxiety, especially for those of us who are older, whenever we go out. Never in most of our lifetimes have we needed more to cling on to Jesus's great promise at the Ascension, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world".

Our Old Testament reading was from the book of Genesis – the story of Jacob's Ladder, or, as all my commentaries assure me would be more correct, Jacob's Staircase – forget about angels hanging on precariously as they jostle and push past each other in different directions on a flimsy wooden ladder. As we have been these last months and still are, Jacob, that night of the dream, was way out of his comfort zone, probably lonely, scared, uncertain of his future, unused to being out at night, tired, anxious, homesick. In a way, he'd brought the situation on himself by his unscrupulous actions against his brother Esau, first stealing Esau's birthright as the older brother (the incident of the mess of pottage), then conning their father into giving him the official blessing of the heir. Esau was understandably hopping mad and was threatening to kill this pesky sibling and Rebekah, their mother, wisely saw that Jacob needed to get out of the way pronto, so she got Isaac to send him off to her kin to find a bride.

Jacob's name means, "He who clutches". He was so named because, when the twins were born, he came out second but clutching his brother's heel. And His whole life to date has been one of clutching, grasping at the top spot, doing his best to supplant Esau and deprive him of his rightful heritage as the one who was born first. As Alan Bennett memorably reminded us, "Esau was an hairy man, but Jacob was a smooth man". Smooth, not only in the hirsuteness stakes but also in the modern sense – charming, suave, ingratiating, but somehow slippery, untrustworthy and insincere. Esau was an outdoor man, Jacob a home-loving indoor person, even doing the cooking - a budding Bronze Age Master Chef. There is certainly more than a suggestion that Esau was not the brightest pin in the box, but Jacob was highly intelligent, calculating and wily. Two totally contrasting siblings, but Jacob had robbed his brother twice and was now on the run, alone in the great outdoors. He had got about 25 miles from home and was very tired, so lay down to sleep, using a convenient stone as a pillow. His dream, his vision was life-changing. First that ladder, that staircase full of angels going about their business – one suggestion is that the ones going up were carrying the needs of humans – prayers if you like – up to heaven and the ones coming down were carrying God's grace, divine assistance to humankind. Then second God appeared and spoke to Jacob, Jacob the unscrupulous youth who had twice robbed his brother, Jacob

who had shown little inclination to serve or obey or worship God before, Jacob who had decided to take his destiny in his own hands and cheat his way to the top. God's blessing then (and, of course, now) does not depend on our worthiness. All of us fall short of the glory of God:- God seeks out sinners who are prepared to acknowledge their sin and that they cannot win their way to heaven by their own resources.

God's assurances to Jacob encompass the past, the present and the future. He identifies himself as the God of Abraham and of Isaac – Jacob's grandfather and father - and renews with Jacob the covenant that he had made with his forbears. He promises to be with him in this present journey, "Behold I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest". And he promises great things for the future – first that he will return to his homeland, then that he will have innumerable descendants (at present he has neither wife nor children), then that in his seed all the world – "all the families of the earth" - will be blessed.

In reply, Jacob promises, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the LORD be my God". At first sight, this seems a little churlish, putting all those conditions on the vow – *if* God does this and *if* God does that, and *if* I do get home... The vow seems a bit calculating and, if we read on in Genesis, we will see that Jacob did continue his scheming a bit and really he did not fully understand or accept or follow up God's promises until the incident of the wrestling match 40 years later when he eventually did return to Canaan. But probably the ifs do not mean buts, but more '*on the basis of the fact that*' God has done, is doing, and will do all these things, then, of course, I must serve him and trust him. From that day forward Jacob committed himself to God as best as he was able. So he is like us – we have committed ourselves to God, to be his people, to worship and serve him and trust him as best we can in whatever circumstances, Covid included, we find ourselves. God chose this slippery, undeserving, self-obsessed, young man to fulfil his purposes for the world, and still he chooses imperfect, unworthy, half-hearted, selfish men and women to be his church to serve him and the world.

To mark the occasion Jacob set up the rock he had been using as a pillow as a standing stone and anointed it with oil – consecrating it to be a place of worship and of remembrance and of holiness. And so that little oil-soaked rock became the prototype, first of the Temple in Jerusalem and then for the myriad church buildings all over the world. Jacob called it, "Beth-El", which means in Hebrew simply 'House of God'.

The church, the ecclesia, the assembly consists, of course, of people, and every local congregation is a foretaste of heaven as God gathers together a community of different people – people with different gifts, perhaps of different ethnicities and cultures, people with different resources: material, intellectual, spiritual, people of different ages and states of health. For in *community* we can be the church better. What is the church for? It is for worship, it is for prayer and the study of God's word to build each other up, it is for service of God and of our fellow men and women, it is for witness, it is for bringing God's people together to reassure and help and encourage each other in fellowship.

And all of these functions are greatly enhanced if the local church, that gathering of different people, has a building, a centre, a meeting place, a *house* of God. That little stone at Beth-El stood for centuries as a *witness* to Jacob's great dream and great encounter and increased awareness of the reality of the presence of God. So, St Botolph's has stood here,

beside the site of the gate to the city of Cambridge, for centuries as a witness to everyone coming into the town of a worshipping, God-encountering, God-revealing community in this locality. It was here during the Black Death and the Peasant's Revolt, the Reformation and the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution and the great World Wars silently witnessing to Jesus Christ and to the presence of a Christian community.

The clearing at Beth-El became a centre of worship. Yes, because of modern technology, we can do worship together in a rather individualistic way outside the building from our own homes – but how much better it is to see each other face to face, to join together – even if, for the moment, someone has to sing on our behalf – to be the church, the congregation here. Worship means, of course, giving God his worth, and the effort to come here, to give up our time for Him, to enhance the worship of others, to *give* to God in this holy place is all part of worship – not just liturgy and hymnody and public prayer.

In due course, the descendants of Jacob met together at Beth-El to share in the memory of the giving of the covenant promise to their ancestor and in their own renewing of vows to trust and serve. So the church in this place is a good place to meet in fellowship to share, to encourage each other (even if we can only do it at a distance at the moment), to pray communally, to listen to God's word explained and expounded, to understand better and help others understand better the great truths of our religion.

The shrine at Beth-El stood as a symbol of the awesomeness and holiness of God, set aside, consecrated, as it was as a place of witness, worship and remembrance of God's amazing promises and blessing to Jacob and to his descendants and to all the families of the earth. We stand on holy ground, where generations have been able to encounter the living God. And the architecture here, and all the embellishments added over the centuries right down to today's new frontal for the Lord's table, are designed to show us how people down the years have been willing to dedicate money and resources and skills to demonstrate something of the greatness and the glory of God to us-ward.

We can only trust that the 'new normal' will revert to the old normal soon, when we can be the church militant here on earth effectively again, when we can use this building as a witness to those outside our walls, as a place to meet and share in worship and fellowship and Christian growth and as a centre to reach out into the community at large to serve God and our neighbours.

Rev Dr Jonathan Holmes

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