

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 8th Sunday after Trinity – 2nd August 2020

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The last time we saw Jacob he was on the run, going into exile after deceiving his father and his brother Esau. It was then that he encountered God in his dream of the ladder. Now he is back, and the day of reckoning has arrived, for the following day he is due to meet Esau and he doesn't yet know if he will be forgiven or killed. Just before our Old Testament passage Jacob says a prayer of humility: 'I am not worthy of all the steadfast love and faithfulness you have shown to your servant' (recognising what God has done for him in exile); 'deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother' (recognising his dependence on God); 'yet you have said, "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea"' (expressing his ultimate trust in God).

It is then that Jacob encounters the man with whom he wrestles all night and, in the morning, finds he is both wounded and blessed. We are not told whether his opponent had any wounds. But when Jacob meets his brother, 'Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him'. ... Jacob said: 'Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour.' Does that remind us of anything? To me, it speaks of the father of the prodigal, in the parable where Jesus offers us a glimpse of the reconciliation which God longs for each one of us.

What Jacob discovers is that, in our encounters with God, we are accepted for who we are, *and* we are changed. We are humbled but we are healed. As one commentator puts it: 'The blessing that Jacob receives is the blessing of integrity. Mysterious though it is, it is our wounds that make us whole.'¹

Jacob/Israel is called by God to be a blessing to all the nations. The notion of the wounded healer dates back to antiquity. In Greek mythology Chiron, the centaur from whose name we get *chirurgie* in French and surgery in English, was wounded by an arrow and suffered pain for the rest of his days, but became a legendary healer. Plato maintained that the most skilful physicians are those who have suffered illness. And there is a statistic that some three quarters of people who enter the therapeutic professions identify as having had an experience of suffering which made them want to relieve suffering in others. It seems to be a pattern in the human condition. Broken, but blessed, and blessing in turn.

Turning to our Gospel reading, having spent some time reflecting on the parables of Jesus, for the next two Sundays the Lectionary invites us to reflect on two of the miracles. How are we to read the miracle stories? We saw with the parables the importance of not seeking to reduce them to single, restrictive meanings but to allow their indirectness to work in us, opening us up to the spiritual truths they contain, revealing new insights along our journey of faith. So it is with the miracles. One thing we mustn't do is spend our time worrying about 'what really happened' and whether we can believe in them literally. It's worth remembering that the Gospels were written some decades after Jesus's ministry, when the eye witnesses were beginning to die out and the need was

¹ Angela Tilby, *Reflections*, p 194.

understood to record the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection and its significance for all humanity.

Like the parables, the miracles have different layers of meaning. In order to read them well, we must appreciate that whatever history lies behind them, the stories in their present form are what has been called 'a literary creation with a theological purpose'.² At least three of the Gospels were written by Jewish authors, who would have been familiar with the literary technique of *Haggadah* (which means 'narrative'). This was a creative type of theological writing that started with a text from Scripture and meditated on it freely, showing how a prophecy was being fulfilled, using symbolism and allegory to create a new story that applied to the present the truths, hopes, patterns and meanings of the scriptural past.

The Gospel writers want to tell us of Jesus's significance. In the feeding of the five thousand (the only miracle which appears in all four Gospels – an indicator that it was considered foundational to the faith), one theological purpose of the story is to show that Jesus was a new Moses. Like Moses, Jesus crosses water to get to 'a deserted place', sits the people down in companies and feeds them with miraculous bread from heaven in such abundance that baskets are left over. Jesus's actions also point to Elisha, in chapter 4 of the Second Book of Kings when Elisha takes an army of men into the desert and feeds them miraculously with a few loaves. If nothing else, this story is telling us that in recalling what Moses did Jesus is fulfilling the Law, and in recalling what Elisha did Jesus is fulfilling the Prophets. As at the Transfiguration, which we will celebrate on Thursday, when his closest followers see a vision of Moses and

² Jeffrey John, *The Meaning in the Miracles*, p 5.

Elijah with Jesus, this miracle is teaching us that Jesus is the one whom the Law and the Prophets foretold: the long-expected Messiah.

That's one layer of meaning, but there are more. There is a christological layer (we learn more about the nature and identity of Jesus), an eschatological layer (the story speaks of the 'end' time, presenting Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment for humanity and offering a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the traditional image of paradise), there is a symbolic layer (bread was a common symbol for the word of God, and there is symbolism in the numbers – twelve baskets for the twelve tribes), and there is a sacramental layer: no early Christian hearing the story could have failed to spot the references to the eucharistic worship which was becoming the hallmark of their community. In the miracle Jesus takes bread, blesses it and breaks it - just like at the Last Supper; just like they were learning to do each week.

All these dimensions of meaning were important to the Gospel writers, and they are important to us as we travel our journey of faith. The stories of the miracles of feeding and healing help to open us up to the abundant, healing power of God. Overcoming our self-protecting fears, our crippling sense of self-enclosure, learning what it means to be open to the world, each other and to God, offering us fullness of life. Broken, blessed, and blessing in our turn. That's a good message to be reminded of in a time of pandemic.

We wondered earlier about the one who wrestled with Jacob, what his wounds might have been as a result of his encounter with awkward, rebellious, wounded humanity. The answer lies in the wounds of Christ. Our wounded healer. They are to be found on the Cross, that central symbol of our faith on which Christ

was stretched out once and for all time. In the suffering of this world at a time of pandemic. In refugee camps and drought starved landscapes across human history. As our anthem today puts it:

‘Therefore he who shows us God
Helpless hangs upon the tree;
And the nails and crown of thorns
Tell of what God’s love must be.

Here is God, no monarch he,
Throned in easy state to reign;
Here is God, whose arms of love,
Aching, spent, the world sustain.’

Wounded healers. We are called to be both. For we are all wounded, yet we are all capable of bringing healing to others as we walk in Christ’s footsteps here on earth. Broken, blessed, and (please God) blessing in our turn. In the name of the one who lived and died and rose again for us.

Amen.