**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**
**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**
**Sermon – Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity**
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**All Saints' Marseille**

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How familiar are you with Jacob's story — his long journey, his complicated family, and especially that strange night by the river when he wrestled until daybreak? It is one of the most extraordinary stories in Scripture.

Jacob's night struggle has found its way into song and story — from Suzanne Vega's quiet lyricism to Madonna's *Isaac*, from U2's searching *Until the End of the World* to the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Rainer Maria Rilke. Each, in their own way, has sensed in Jacob's story something of the human condition — our wrestling with the Eternal, with others, with ourselves It is the outward sign of an inner struggle, the visible shape of a night of the soul.

Painters and sculptors, too, have tried to give form to that mystery. Marc Chagall shows the angel lifting Jacob almost into flight — a dance between heaven and earth. Jacob Epstein carved the figures in massive alabaster, locked in an almost brutal embrace. The two could not be more different, yet both recognise the same truth: that Jacob's struggle is everyone's struggle — the night when faith and fear, weakness and hope, meet face to face.

Jacob's very name tells his story. Jacob — the supplanter, the usurper, the heel-grabber, the trickster. He has lived up to his name. He came

into the world clutching his twin brother Esau's heel, as if already striving for first place. He traded Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup. He deceived his blind father Isaac and stole the blessing that belonged to his brother. He schemed and manipulated, yet he also dreamed of ladders to heaven. He wrestled blessings out of others, but never quite found peace.

And now, at last, his old patterns have brought him to the edge of reckoning. He is about to meet his brother after twenty years apart. The night before that meeting, alone by the river, Jacob finds himself caught in a struggle he cannot escape or control. Before dawn, the man who has always grasped and fled will find himself grasped — and held — by a power greater than his own.

This is one of the most mysterious scenes in all of Scripture. Our eyes see as dimly in the night as Jacob's. Even when the dawn breaks and Jacob limps away, the questions remain: Who was his opponent? What did this nocturnal struggle accomplish? Why does Jacob bear both wound and blessing?

Jewish sages have long seen in Jacob's struggle a mirror of our own. Some say he wrestled with his conscience, others read the story as the eternal struggle between ego and spirit — the struggle of every soul to yield its will to God's.

Dutch spiritual writer Henri Nouwen called Jacob, after that night, a "wounded healer": one who has wrestled with God and emerged scarred, yet able to bless. American theologian Frederick Buechner named the encounter "the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God." It is defeat that becomes victory, weakness that becomes strength.

Jacob's limp is not punishment but sign — the mark of one who has met God and lived. The wound and the blessing are inseparable; the struggle itself becomes grace.

This story challenges every attempt to domesticate God, to make the divine tame or predictable. As C. S. Lewis reminds us in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, through the voice of Mr. Beaver, speaking of the lion Aslan, who's a representation of God: "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good." So it is with the God of Jacob — not safe, but good; not distant, but fiercely near.

Jacob leaves the Jabbok as the sun rises, limping toward his future. He has seen God face to face and lived. He has been wounded and blessed, broken and made whole. His struggle is ours: the night through which faith is born, the dawn that follows after surrender.

All our readings this Sunday speak of persistence. Jacob refusing to release his mysterious opponent until the blessing is given. A widow, small and powerless, who keeps returning to the door of an unjust judge until justice is done. Paul, writing to Timothy, urging him to persist "whether the time is favourable or unfavourable." And the psalmist, who takes courage from God's own persistence: "He who watches over you will not sleep."

Our persistence, it seems, rests upon God's. We can hold on because God holds on. We can stay awake through the night because God never sleeps.

Both Jacob and the widow persist in the face of apparent divine resistance. They refuse to let go. In both stories, God's hiddenness —

even God's seeming reluctance — becomes the very context in which true faith is revealed. Faith is not the absence of struggle, but the courage to engage it. Faith is not quiet resignation, but tenacious trust. It is wrestling that does not end until blessing comes.

To wrestle with God is not to reject him — it is to stay close, to keep our arms wrapped around the One who alone can bless us. Wrestling is the opposite of apathy, the opposite of resignation, even the opposite of loneliness. As long as we wrestle, we have not walked away.

Jacob's cry — "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" — and the widow's cry for justice are born of the same spirit. Both voices rise from the night. Both refuse to give up on God. And both, in the end, find that the struggle itself is the place of blessing.

This is a strange truth of faith: in wrestling with God, we find not victory but surrender — and in surrender, blessing. Jacob lost his strength and found a limp, but also a new name. The widow lost her fear and found justice. Each discovered that the struggle itself was the place where grace met them.

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" asks Jesus. Faith that persists. Faith that contends. Faith that wrestles. Not a tidy, untroubled faith, but one that dares to cling through the night — one that will not let go until the light comes.

Perhaps that is what it means to be blessed: not to escape the struggle, but to be found still holding on when dawn breaks.