

## The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 24)

*St Thomas', Salisbury, 2022*

*Genesis 32:22-31*

*2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5*

*Luke 18:1-8*

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Was anyone listening to Radio 2 just after lunch on Monday? I had a 20 minute drive from Cuddesdon College, where I was teaching, into the centre of Oxford to meet with one of my spiritual directees who is a curate there. And it was the Jeremy Vine show, which often fills me with a fair degree of fury. But I happened to catch the entirety of an interview with a chap called Gaz, who is the leader of Bradford Wrestling Church. Anyone else hear this? I would find it quite reassuring if someone else did, because it does sound a bit like a fever dream!

But no, it is true, because they have a website! And on their website they say this: “Gaz has pooled his contacts within the wrestling world to start this church, and looks to host events all over the UK, sharing his story, fighting in the ring, and seeing people come to Christ.” And basically in this interview with Jeremy Vine Gaz explained that what he runs is a church which hosts two or three fights per session - pro wrestling fights - which illustrate and help people to engage with the struggles and the fights with which they contend in their lives. And each fight is linked to doctrinal truth or a biblical story. He gave the example on the radio of David and Goliath. But he could just as easily have referred of course to the rather extraordinary first lesson set for today: Jacob wrestling with the angel.

As always happens when young children are left alone without their parents, Robert and I were having a giggle in the vestry before the service about how much fun it would be to set up a wrestling ring in the nave and then, when Kelvin came back from his holiday, pretend that we had done wrestling church here this morning!

Genesis, particularly the early chapters of Genesis, is full of these extraordinary stories of bizarre encounters between God and humanity. Very often with no additional information or explanation given. And today's reading is a perfect example. “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” Where did this man come from? What did he look like? How did they begin wrestling? We have no idea.

What becomes evident as the story draws to a close, however, is that this encounter is all about perseverance and engagement with God. Jacob has sent his family on ahead of him, he's nervous about the potential meeting with his brother Esau, he'd probably much rather be snuggled up in a tent with his loved ones, but instead he has this encounter which tests his resilience and determination.

You might expect Charles Wesley to have written a hymn about this story, and he has! It is not well-known, and used to really irritate people when I set it at the Cathedral. But the text is rather wonderful, and indeed Isaac Watts wrote of it that Wesley's text was worth all the verses that he himself, Watts, had ever written. And what Charles Wesley does is to reframe this Old Testament story in terms of every one of us, searching to know more about who and what God is. And the first verse goes:

Come, O thou Traveller unknown,  
whom still I hold but cannot see;  
my company before is gone,  
and I am left alone with thee;  
with thee all night I mean to stay,  
and wrestle till the break of day.

Wesley's understanding of this strange story is that it is a metaphor, or a way of understanding, the constant struggle that all of us have to know, comprehend, and understand who God is and what God's purposes might be. The hymn goes on:

Yield to me now, for I am weak,  
but confident in self despair;  
speak to my heart, in blessings speak,  
be conquered by my instant prayer;  
speak, or thou never hence shalt move,  
and tell me if thy name be Love?

All three of our readings today are calling us to *perseverance*. We are moving into the closing weeks of this Christian year. Advent and the Christmas Tree Festival are in sight! And the consistent themes of these final few weeks are about being strengthened for the journey. How are we to be constant in prayer? How are we to be steadfast? To maintain unflinching our hope in Love: Love the person and the name; as the world grows darker and colder? The second letter to Timothy is all about being consistent. Preach the word in season and out of season. Keep going. And keep being formed. Keep growing. Keep supple and nimble in your faith. Keep on being, if you like, ready for the fight. We anoint candidates for baptism with oil just before they are baptised, and the symbolism of that is the anointing of athletes in the ancient world, before they enter the wrestling ring, or begin the race. And Timothy is told to keep on

honing, keep on shaping and forming the people to whom he ministers. All of those lovely words: teach, reprove, train, encourage. Keep on doing it, not just on Christmas Day, not just on Easter Day, not just when the Rector is looking, but on the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity as well.

So we wrestle with the deep truths of our faith. With the tricky and complicated Scripture. With the moral and ethical teachings. We read our Bible. We try to sharpen our prayers. We watch the news, and we try to work out how everything that we see fits with the promises of a God of love. We wrestle till the break of day with God, and in the end we receive a blessing.

That is what Jesus is talking about the parable about the unjust judge. As usual Luke's Jesus is using exaggeration and hyperbole, but the point is well made. If even an unjust judge will eventually respond to persistence, how much more will God, whose name is Love, bless our persistence. Remember the point of the parable: "then Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart." And Jacob wrestling with the angel is a physical example of that.

We are to work our faith like a muscle. In that way it grows, it becomes stronger, it becomes more flexible, it is honed for the task of living out that faith in the midst of a world of challenge, trial and darkness. So that as 'one more step along the world I go', I am ready for the next moment where I will need to wrestle to make sense of this faith I hold, wrestle to work out how this God whom I know to be Love squares with the world as I experience it. And so we get a little bit better at praying always, and not losing heart.

And of course we get a bit dented as we go. Jacob has this extraordinary encounter with the angel, but the last bit of the

story tells us that at the end of it he limps off. So, we too, collect scars as we make our way through this world. But, as Easter morning reminds us, resurrection is not flummoxed by nail holes. And the One with whom we wrestle is the same One about whom we will sing in six weeks as “with what rapture gaze we on those glorious scars.”

This is the journey, brothers and sisters, into knowing the One who is Love. And Charles Wesley sums it up in his final verse:

Lame as I am, I take the prey;  
Hell, earth and sin, with ease o'ercome.  
I leap for joy, pursue my way,  
and, as a bounding hart, I run,  
through all eternity to prove  
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

Amen.