



Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

✚ In the name of Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit — *Amen*

Many a man has stayed out many a night, and many have been the brawls in which many men strove. Many a man has come home to many a wife — though usually not as many as *Jacob* came home to — and they have told many an improbable tale about exactly *why* they were detained overnight, and how they acquired that suspicious limp. *Not* many such tales match this morning's lesson from Genesis for their portentous obscurity, though. Not many men come home after a long night out and explain to Rachel... to Leah... to Bilhah... to Zilpah —

Last night I got into a stramash with a mysterious stranger, who might have been an angel, or maybe even God, and we were grappling till daybreak, when he put me hip out of joint. And I wouldn't let go until he bless me, so he did — but now, *ahem*, I have to change my name and move to a different county.

Jacob's struggle was no ordinary drunken affray of the sort one may observe (or, I suppose, participate in) after closing time in the lanes of Oxford. Although at first the narrator *specifies* no supernatural dimension to the adventure, his very reticence

elicits our curious ruminations. Why, in the first instance, did Jacob go back across the Jabbok after all his household and all his goods had already crossed before him? Who was this anonymous assailant, and why did he attack Jacob? If this was indeed a supernatural opponent, why was he unable to overcome Jacob? Exactly what sort of blessing did Jacob get? The murkiness of this whole narrative emphasises that something more than ordinary took place that night.

Indeed, the setting and the characters might have been drawn from the stock repertoire of folk literature. The midnight crossing, the unexplained combatant, the epic struggle, the urgency of settling the fight before dawn, the indeterminate blessing that seems not to have directly affected the rest of Jacob's story — these belong to such scenarios as the Three Billy Goats Gruff and their under-the-bridge troll, or to Gandalf and the Balrog, or Arthur and the Black Knight in the Monty Python film.

Despite all the ambiguities and uncertainties resounding through the story, though, several points stand out clearly. First, though the anonymous attacker *starts* the midnight brangle, nonetheless it reflects something persistent about Jacob's own character. At his birth, he tries to supplant his brother Esau, coming into the world with his hand gripping Esau's heel; he snookers his plain-dealing brother out of the family inheritance; he swindles Esau *and* Isaac his father by masquerading as his brother and stealing Isaac's blessing. He has just contended with his father-in-law Laban in a fourteen-year battle of wits. And now here, by the river Jabbok whose name forms a twisted echo of his own name, Jacob once again struggles to come out on top.

Second, however much the narrator and Jacob try to paint this as a clear victory for the wily patriarch, *he's* the one who comes away with a dislocated hip.

Indeed, as much as Jacob demands to know his opponent's identity, his assailant does *not*, in the end, reveal his name. When Jacob told Rachel... or Leah... or Bilhah... or Zilpah about how he wrestled with God *and prevailed*, we would understand if they just exchanged knowing glances, and said, 'Yes, dear. We should see how the *other* guy looks.'

Third, the narrator throws in three distinct Just-So story explanations — *aetiologies* — as if they were the main point of telling about this odd business. *This*, we are told, explains why the sons of Israel abstain from eating the sinew that joins thigh to hip socket. And *this* explains why a particular location became known as 'Peniel', 'face of God' — because Jacob says he had seen God face to face, and yet his life was preserved. And *this* explains why Jacob changed his name to Israel, 'for he had striven with God and with humans, and had prevailed', becoming the eponymous father of the kingdom whose name endures to the present day — but then even the name is a bit of a fraud, since it more naturally might be understood to mean 'God strives'.

All these explanations and rationalisations, though, bypass the unsettling power of this tale itself. At the beginning of this morning's lesson, Jacob is still the strategist, the *operator*, figuring out how to set up his encounter with Esau in such a way as to minimise the chance that he'll be harmed by the brother who promised to kill him five chapters ago. Then he falls into a mystical melee with a menacing mugger, and when day breaks he returns to his family a *changed* man, stumbling into the role of an agrarian patriarch — making peace with Esau, and eventually settling down and making a home in Hebron.

This turning point in Jacob's life, in *Israel's* life, came when he stayed up all night, struggling with forces beyond his ken, and — to an outside observer —

specifically *not* prevailing. And this very experience, contending with a greater strength, a greater wisdom, a greater power, in itself conferred a blessing on Jacob. He did not need to *win* to be blessed; *you* do not have to win to be blessed. The gift, the benefit, the blessing comes through the *struggle*, not from a victory.

Our message, the Church's message, does not depend on *winning* any more than Jacob won on that long, arduous night by the Jabbok. Most of the characters in the Bible *prevail* only in the sense that they keep faith with God — and at that sometimes only a tenuous, wavering faith. No matter what static we hear about indomitable, unyielding heroes, the slogan 'Never give up; never surrender' belongs to macho fantasies rather than to the gospel. Jacob and Jesus and a whole procession of their friends and relations in humble chorus remind us that most of the time, day by weary day, we prevail *just by hanging on*.

While you and I may never scrimmage with a man, or an angel, or God, we will most assuredly meet with unexpected challenges from unfamiliar quarters. Need we *vanquish* them? We will day after day bump into neighbours whose ways and words diverge from ours. Need we *outdo* them? We will wrestle with obscure notions that threaten to undermine our very sense of identity in ways we can't easily name; need we insist to our pals that 'No, really, *I* strove with Hegel *and won*'? Or might we instead simply push onward, marshalling every nerve and muscle to articulate the most powerful case for our convictions — and then *yield*, and *then* receive a blessing.

Some evening, late at night, when you are close to a breakthrough over against an enigmatic problem set, or a vexatious policy proposal, or a malformed theory of any sort, and when you can scent the victorious conclusion of your essay lying just minutes beyond your keyboard, if only you could wring it out of the

seething torrents of contending ideas, perhaps caffeine-fueled, perhaps whisky-charged — perhaps as you look out across the Jabbok at some great personal victory, perhaps that night your challenges will put your thigh out of place and you will *not* prevail. Your tutors did not overcome every challenge; your government has not solved every problem; your laboratory has not cracked every conundrum; the Church hasn't nailed down every answer to every question. You can't always get what you want. Sometimes daybreak comes and we *haven't* beaten the angel, *haven't* forced him to tell us his name, and all we can do is hold tight and ask for his blessing. This is *all right* — for you, for us, for everyone; and it is all right before God. *Bless you.*

Many a weary night, many a book-burdened scholar conducts rhetorical brawls with her footnotes and bibliographies. Many a questioning soul wrestles with doubts and definitions. Many a heartsick wanderer loses his way and thrashes through dense clouds of disorienting mixed signals. Many women and many men strive alone all night through, and when morning comes they, as Jacob at the Jabbok — hipshot and exhausted — catch up with their mates with no tangible reward except a limp and an outlandish story. But one way or another we will make it across the Jabbok. There is a blessing in striving, and a grace in yielding. And Rachel... and Leah... and Bilhah... and Zilpah are waiting for us on the other side, waiting for our stories.

AMEN