

prepared by Rev Ruth Lownsborough

This week in Genesis, the focus of our thoughts is centred around 'The God who comes to people in their struggles'. So as we prepare to worship God, let us pray:

Today Lord, I come to you just as I am, with all my fears and anxieties, with my hopes and dreams, with my faith and doubt. Hold me tenderly, like a loving parent and breathe your love and peace into my heart. In the name of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour. Amen

Hymn StF 629 God of my faith, I offer you my doubt

God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
For life at times seems far too dark for me,
and my belief becomes more insecure,
when worldly cares produce uncertainty.

God of my hope, I offer you my fear,
When I am scared by my anxiety,
When all I hear is suffering and woe,
In all my shadows you will walk with me.

God of my joy, I offer you my grief,
When I sink down in sadness or despair,
When in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.

God of my love, I offer you my pain,
When I'm alone and feel nobody cares,
In aching age or in rejected youth,
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.

God of my life, I offer you my dreams,
Light in the darkness where I hide from view,
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,
Light in my life and all my life in you.

By Colin Ferguson

Some words from **a prayer** inspired by Psalm 85

'Look upon me Lord, with renewing, refreshing life. See beyond my brokenness, my ceaseless struggle – my trespasses, transgressions; all I have done and left undone.

My daughters thrive, my sons flourish, the children of my children walk in the light of mercy. Reclaim me. Restore me – that I may hear your voice, walk in your ways, to the glory of your name – for You have made Yourself known to me; called me your beloved.'

The Story so far....

Jacob and Esau were brothers of rivalry right from their birth; their parents Isaac and Rebekah too, each drawn to a different son. Jacob, with the help of his mother, cheated Esau of his birthright and his father's blessing. As a result, Jacob fled to a relative, Laban and Esau hated his brother. A monumental family struggle if ever there was one!

Over the years, both brothers take wives, and their families, goods and livestock become great. Jacob has experienced both struggles and blessings and through them he has been transformed by God's grace and presence from one not averse to cheating into a man whose awareness of God and God's call on his life grows.

Then God tells Jacob to return home. Jacob is unsurprisingly anxious about returning to a place where, after many years, Esau might still want revenge. But God has promised Jacob that he would be with him and Jacob learns more about trusting God in his struggle.

Reading Genesis 32: 22-30 Jacob wrestles at Peniel

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Activity – write the words 'struggles' and 'blessings' as headings on a piece of paper. Underneath each heading, write down examples that you know of or have experienced. Can you identify any themes in each list? Struggles could be issues with health, or finance or relationships. Blessings might be 'good neighbours', a beautiful view, unexpected card or phone call. Perhaps blessing came through a struggle?

Spend some time prayerfully thanking God for each blessing and asking for God's presence and help in your struggles. You might like to read Psalm 121:

1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;

4 indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;

6 the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

7 The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;

8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

The story continues.....Genesis 33: 1-20 Jacob meets Esau

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant."

Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down.

Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?"

"To find favour in your eyes, my lord," he said.

But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself."

"No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favour in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favourably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

Then Esau said, "Let us be on our way; I'll accompany you."

But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are tender and that I must care for the ewes and cows that are nursing their young. If they are driven hard just one day, all the animals will die. So let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I move along slowly at the pace of the flocks and herds before me and the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

Esau said, "Then let me leave some of my men with you."

"But why do that?" Jacob asked. "Just let me find favour in the eyes of my lord."

So that day Esau started on his way back to Seir. Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth.

After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. For a hundred pieces of silver,¹ he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel.

Reflection

The theme of struggle reminds me of the struggles of recent history: the civil rights movement in USA, Martin Luther King, thousands of unknown people who struggled against the injustice of inequality. The overthrow of apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin wall separating E & W Germany, current struggles for peace in Syria, Afghanistan, Israel & Gaza. You can probably think of many more! But struggle is not only on a national level, there is struggle for all of us at one time or another in our lives!

But in them God wants us to stay close because these are often times when we can grow in our relationship with God. We heard of Jacob's all night wrestle with God. Maybe some of us have had nights like that, wrestling with whatever circumstances God has placed us in.

Jacob had real reason to struggle with God.....It was God who had called him back to the promised land, having fled from his brother's anger at stealing their father's blessing. Esau and Jacob had been apart for a long time and Jacob was frightened of meeting him again because of what he had done. To appease his brother, Jacob set aside a huge gift for Esau, many livestock of all kinds and slaves and sends them off at intervals down the road to meet Esau but he still doesn't know how they or his family or himself would be received. Would Esau still be angry with him?....., and the news that Esau has 400 men with him doesn't help Jacob to feel any easier.

Jacob is following God's call but it is a struggle, with the past memories of his injustice against his brother and an unknown future about to be revealed before him. That night, before meeting Esau, we hear of how Jacob wrestles with an assailant, an assailant who will not let him go.

We understand this character to be God. They wrestle until morning, when Jacob demands a blessing before letting his assailant go. Perhaps this blessing is in contrast to their father's blessing that Jacob stole from Esau. Jacob clings to God and in the end is blessed by God.

The result of all this is that Jacob is a changed man and he receives a new name, Israel; always a significant occasion in the Bible. Jacob/Israel is also given a permanent reminder of his struggle with God – a sore hip. I wonder how Jacob felt the next day when he went forward into the Promised Land to meet his brother, a new name and a sore hip constantly reminding him of his experience with God but still not knowing what the outcome of his encounter with Esau would be.

In the next part of Jacob's story we discover that God's blessing is extended to restored relationship with Esau. Esau and Jacob were reunited, although they don't stay together as families.

From these stories of struggle, where God's presence is very evident, we can perhaps understand that God is with us as we struggle with past and present experiences, and God is with us as we go forwards into the future whether we know what it might hold or not.

Hindsight is sometimes a wonderful thing; it can help us to perhaps make sense of our struggle for it is often only when we look back that we can see how much we have changed, how we have come through a difficult experience, how we have learned, how faith might have been tested. It is perhaps in these times of reflection that we can see where God has been at work in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

God knows each one of us intimately and his desire is to bless us in ways that are too great for us to imagine but often that blessing comes through struggle.

I urge you in the words of Paul in his second letter to Timothy: proclaim the message (the good news of Jesus), be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching, carry out your ministry fully.

Let us keep on struggling, in God's strength, to receive God's blessing. Amen

Prayer

Lord, sometimes I find it hard to see the blessing in my struggles, when I am tired and discouraged and lonely. I find it hard to keep praying when I feel stale and tired and defeated.

Grant me the energy, the faith and the perseverance to live through my struggles, and may I receive your blessing that I may rejoice again. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayers for Others – *hold a time of silence between each line of prayer*

Think of someone who is frightened; someone whose world has come crashing down for whatever reason..

Think of someone who is hurting inside; someone who longs to know compassion, hope and peace....

Think of someone who is challenged by an awareness that their life needs to change in some way....

Think of someone who is broken; whose tomorrows are clouded by despair....

Think of someone who is happy; who overflows with thankfulness because of God's blessings....

Think of someone whose life is being touched by God, even through their struggles....

Think of someone who is discovering what it means to offer and receive forgiveness.....

Think of yourself and all that you carry within you, all you must face tomorrow....

Think of yourself and the promises of God, to hold you, bless you and love you, now and always.

Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayer. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn StF 639 Through the love of God our Saviour

1 Through the love of God our Saviour,

All will be well;

Free and changeless is His favour;

All, all is well.

Precious is the blood that healed us;

Perfect is the grace that sealed us;

Strong the hand stretched out to shield us;

All must be well.

2 Though we pass through tribulation,

All will be well;

Ours is such a full salvation;

All, all is well.

Happy still in God confiding,

Fruitful, if in Christ abiding,

Holy through the Spirit's guiding,

All must be well.

3 We expect a bright tomorrow;

All will be well;

Faith can sing through days of sorrow,

All, all is well.

On our Father's love relying,

Jesus every need supplying,

Or in living, or in dying,

All must be well.

Mary Peters

Blessing

May you find peace in your praying, and blessing in your struggling;
and may you bring blessing to everyone you meet.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.