

Genesis 32: 22-32

The strange logics of the Gospel is certainly well and alive here: the logics of the kingdom of God, where the first will be last and the last will be first; the confounding logics of the beatitudes where those who mourn, the poor in spirit, the persecuted are called blessed.

Where the chosen turns out to be a refugee; where the blessing leaves you limping.

We left Jacob's story at his Bethel-dream – where he fled the wrath of his brother and at the same time the place where he discovered the Lord was present without him knowing it.

Many years have passed now. Jacob has now been living in Haran for 20 years. He has married the two daughters of Laban and between the two of them they gave birth to eleven children. Jacob has become a wealthy man.

Life has become good to him in many ways. However, there was still one unsettled account; one dark figure looming somewhere in the background. There was still one person he had to face some time...and that time was drawing nearer. And that person was Esau, his brother, whom he deceived.

In the previous chapter we are told that Jacob decides to go back to Edom where his family lived. It is in preparation for this return that Jacob decides to test the waters by sending messengers with presents out ahead of him to try and appease his brother.

But the word about Jacob's plans must have travelled faster than the messengers. Very soon the messengers returned with this news: "We went to your brother Esau, and he is already on his way to meet you. He has four hundred men with him."

You don't travel with four hundred men for no reason. Jacob realized that only too well. We are told he was frightened and worried.

Samuel Terrien, an OT scholar describes this moment in Jacob's life beautifully:

"Twenty years previously, his cowardice had prompted him to flee the avenging anger of his twin, Esau, whom he had fraudulently deprived of their father's blessing. Now he again faced the same brother, and he was overpowered by fear. His clan, his herds, his baggage, his wives and his children descended the steep track which wound its way down the canyon of the Jabbok. He let the caravan pass the ford ahead of him, and he remained alone at the bottom of the gorge. High above him on the Transjordan plateau, his family encamped under the windswept sky. From where he was, that same sky looked like a narrow band sharply cut by two sombre cliffs. Around him, the subtropical jungle of oleanders and creeping vines crawled with unpleasant animals, with mountain lions and snakes coming to the water's edge. 'And Jacob was left alone.' "

Twenty years ago at Bethel Jacob discovered that the Lord was at that place and he did not know it. Twenty years are a long time. Jacob had become an affluent man. The ladder is long gone and so is the memory of the dream.

Facing Jacob now is only the nightmare of having to face his brother. This is extremely

important to remember - for as the night closes in on Jacob, as he anticipates what the next day may bring, there is only one face on his mind: the face of Esau.

And indeed many commentators have suggested that this dark, unnamed "man" who appeared during the night may very well have been Esau's spirit; the demon forcing Jacob to face his own demons.

The bible doesn't tell us who he is: the nightly visitor who came to threaten him, to wrestle with him. The story only refers to him as "a man". When this man realized he was not going to prevail against Jacob he lashed out and hit him on the hip socket.

Then the stranger beseeched Jacob to let him go for the day was breaking. "I will not let you go unless you bless me", Jacob answered.

This is the pivotal moment in this event. The man began by asking Jacob: What is your name? 'Jacob', he said, in other words: the one who came into the world hanging on to his brother's heel, fraudster, supplanter and liar.

"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with humans and you have prevailed."

As you would know, in the bible, names are very important. Your name was not only a way of identification, but the name contained your destiny, your fate, your place in life and the world. Your name carried your past and contained your future.

When Jacob receives a new name, he receives a new future. And the future is a gift only God can give. Therefore Jacob called the place Peniel, for there he has seen God face to face.

He was expecting Esau, anticipating meeting his brother face to face, but instead he encountered God.

We often hear that the way to God goes through other people. Here Jacob discovers that the way to other people also goes through God.

Making peace with others indeed often requires us to make peace with God first. Accepting others is often a long, long journey on which we have to make the discovery that we are indeed accepted by God.

And the discovery of this acceptance, the dawning of faith, the reception of God's blessing is not the stuff of fairy tales. It is not the discovery of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow; it is wrought in and through our wrestling with God.

Hence faith never picks up where fairy tales end: "And they lived happily ever after". Faith may answer our ultimate questions, but it is also questions all our ultimate answers. (Heschel)

Then follows what is the most poignant verse in this story, perhaps even in the entire Jacob history: "***The sun rose as Jacob was leaving Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.***" (31)

The sun rose as for the first time for Jacob reborn, the sun rose on the birth of Israel, on

the one whom God had chosen...and he was limping. Jacob has prevailed in what turns out to be, as Frederick Buechner calls it, a magnificent defeat.

“That is how Israel comes on the horizon. Israel is not formed by success or shrewdness or land, but by an assault from God. Perhaps it is grace, but not the kind usually imagined...When daylight comes, the stranger is gone. And so is Jacob. There remains only Israel, who had not had a good night's sleep that night. Now there is Israel, blessed and named. Israel is born in the combat where he asked about God's name. That is who Israel must now be on the way to the brother.” (Brueggemann)

There is something highly unusual here, something we would probably not notice. As I have said before, in biblical times the giving of a new name was very important; therefore in Judaism when someone received a new name, the old name was never used again. One can easily see that in the many examples in the bible.

That was true of all of them, but not true of Jacob. Already in the next verse, the next chapter etc, he is still called Jacob. He is chosen, blessed, called and called again; made new but somehow the old remained.

“The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.”

A new day breaks for Jacob, a new future dawns upon him; he has seen the face of God, he has received, not only the birthright, the blessing of his father, but also the blessing of God...and yet he was still limping.

What has always fascinated me about the lives of the great human beings, Pascal, Dostoevsky, Dag Hammarskjöld and many others, was their burning quests for faith, their wrestling with God – and how this left them more humane, fully human but still with open sores in their souls.

And perhaps that is how the blessings of God are dispensed. We recognize who we are and what we have received, not in the moments our hearts are singing, but in the moments of godforsakenness.

We often only see God face to face when we stare down the deep, dark abyss of loneliness, fear and uncertainty. We see God face to face in the wrestling with life itself, in the struggle for daily bread.

It is in that struggle that God comes to us, speaks to us and like Jacob – most of the time – we don't seem to know it.

For perhaps it is only in hindsight that we realize: the bread we had, was indeed the bread of angels. It is in the face of the humble Servant we discover our standing before God.

And it is in this discovery that we become one with Jacob, who, when he saw the sun rising, rose as well, as for the first time, crippled but blessed.