Genesis 32.22-31  
October 19th, 2025

**Struggling with Faith**

Minister: For the Word of God is scripture  
**All: For the Word of God among us**  
Minister: For the Word of God within us  
**All: Thanks be to God. Amen**   
  
Last month I was back in Kettering, my first church and one named after its former minister from the 18th century: The Revd Andrew Fuller.  
  
His image in one of the stained-glass windows shows he was a robust, square jawed individual. Read his biography and much is made of the fact that before becoming a minister he was a Pugilist: a wrestler or a boxer.   
  
Perhaps that stood him in good stead. He lived at a time when strict Calvinists, like himself, thought God didn’t need our help sharing the gospel. Fuller battled, he ‘wrestled’, against that way of thinking. He convinced other Baptist Ministers that Christians should be active in sharing their faith and this group, in 1792, formed the Baptist Missionary Society – which still exists today. Fuller became its first Secretary and William Carey its pioneer missionary.  
  
It only came about because Andrew Fuller wrestled with his faith and then applied it in a new way as he came to a fresh understanding.  
  
In today’s reading from the Jewish scriptures we encounter another wrestler – Jacob. And in reading his story we ponder our own, wondering that, if we wrestle with ideas about God and life, can our faith emerge not weaker but stronger because of the struggle?

Jacob is pivotal to Israel’s story of faith.   
  
His grandfather was Abraham, and his fraternal twin was Esau, who he cheated out of his inheritance. So, Jacob becomes the head of the family and through his twelve sons, who become the twelve tribes, he ends up as the great patriarch and father of the nation, one that even bears his new name of *Israel.*  
  
His story is often confusing. He is a cheat and a liar, yet he is blessed by God. And maybe that doesn’t sit too easily with us. His is often a tale of human weakness and fallibility, yet it’s a life that is blessed by God’s mercy and grace.  
  
So, we meet him in today’s reading returning home after 20 years away. He’s been on his father-in-law’s farm but now he’s heading back; back to potential conflict with his estranged brother Esau. This wasn’t an easy home coming.  
  
The bible often portrays journeys as moments of transformation. In the words of a hymn, that we often sing at the Turn of the Year*: It’s from the old we travel to the new…*  
The very definition of a journey is that we have left one place, one state of mind and being as we set our sights on something different. We might even start a journey as one person and end it, to some extent, another. Journeys can change us.   
  
Whether or not Jacob was at such a seminal moment in his life, this story shows us that even at a moment of new beginnings we still take our past with us. It’s always part of us and flavours the future.  
  
Jacob is aware that Esau was preparing to meet him by surrounding himself with 400 men. Jacob’s re-entry into his brother’s life was fraught with potential conflict because neither of them could forget that day, years ago, when one brother cheated on the other.

After sending his wife and children on – which seems like a despicable act of cowardice, ensuring that they, in some perverse way acted as a buffer between him and Esau, Jacob is, for once in his life, alone. And perhaps it is significant that it’s at that very moment of ‘aloneness’, experiencing silence instead of conversation, having empty space instead of crowded responsibilities, that he finally seems to catch up with God.  
  
What happens next is cryptic. The story has him experiencing a night of struggle. It’s as if an intruder has broken into his chamber and they spend long hours wrestling with each other. Neither seems to be winning and by dawn they are still fighting. Eventually the intruder strikes Jacob’s hip and seems to dislocate it. From now on he walks with a limp, a mark of that night’s encounter.  
  
Is this imaginary? Was the intruder God? Could this be an allegory for prayer?   
  
Perhaps the answer is ‘yes’ to all those questions. Maybe it’s no! It’s the nature of religious myth stories that they are precious narratives which can be read and interpreted on so many different levels. Yet another example of faith being more about poetry than prose.  
  
However, that night of fighting seems central to the story. Even his new name, Israel, reflects the events of it, meaning; *the one who fights and prevails with God*.   
  
So, what can a tale like today’s teach us about faith?   
  
Well, maybe there are surely times when we might think of our faith journey as passive? That following God is best done when we are readily compliant and willingly submissive. If God is our teacher, shouldn’t we be the keen student hanging on every word, always trying to hand in our homework on time.  
  
Today’s narrative from the Jewish Scriptures describes Jacob’s faith journey differently. When it comes to faith Jacob is a struggler, pushing boundaries, asking questions and taking risks. He’s the difficult student, not the compliant one!  
  
Judaism has a wonderful tradition of asking awkward questions. At Passover the youngest in the room starts the evening by questioning its origin. The routine teaching method for a Rabbi was to engage in robust debate with students. Even at the Temple the boy Jesus is found asking questions of the Elders.  
  
Wrestling with God, probing ideas and exploring their consequences, grappling with inconsistencies – all these seem to be a quite normal and expected part of a biblical understanding of discipleship.   
  
So, put it in an educational context, and there’s nothing wrong with being that student at the back of the class who’s always asking ‘why’ and who cannot be fobbed off with bland answers.

Asking questions, even struggling with faith – well maybe the conclusion we draw from this story is – that’s OK, even normal on most peoples’ pilgrimage.

Actually, if we broaden this story out a little it’s not even clear that too many questions are answered by dawn.  
  
The tale goes like this, Jacob simply didn’t give up the struggle with this intruder. It lasted all night, so that by dawn, recognising his tenacity, the intruder departs. Yet, Jacob will bear the scar of this struggle for the rest of his life.  
  
Read one way and today’s rather strange narrative is refreshingly honest. So, could this actually be a story that speaks to us of the way that some of our deepest struggles do mark us for life. Faith doesn’t protect us against the possibilities of divorce or cancer, or the certainty of death. Life is never risk free and neither do we inevitably discover the answers to those big ‘why’ questions we ask from our chair at the back of the class.  
  
Yet, like Jacob, we don’t give up the struggle. We keep at it. We keep on engaging and asking the uncomfortable and honest questions.  
  
You can learn a lot about someone who stands in a pulpit by their choice of books at home! And books can appear quite neat things with well thought out beginnings and clipped endings. Yet they are often the fruit of an author’s struggle. Take those written by Barbara Brown Taylor, an American Episcopal priest who is much loved and admired. Yet her story is one of immense struggle in which she felt suffocated by restrictive church structures. It's not a story of lost faith, but of her ultimately growing outside those church structures.  
  
Or how about the treasured books by the Catholic Priest Henri Nowen, like *The Return of the Prodigal* or *The Wounded Healer.* Nowen’s story is about an interior struggle with faith, one that brought him low, yet also one that didn’t crush him. A struggle which led to him to understand that brokenness is not opposed to faith but central to it.  
  
Or how about someone who doesn’t stand in a pulpit or write the books on ministers’ shelves, but Simon Thomas a SKY Sports commentator and one time BBC Blue Peter Presenter. He’s a Christian who lost his young wife through cancer. It was the struggle of his life, yet he says *if I take God out of the equation then the hope disappears.*Or what about you, what about me? Can we begin to see that struggling with faith, with God, asking questions about love and purpose, is much more normal than we might have once thought.   
  
Well, maybe one of the central lessons in today’s story is that image of Jacob’s struggle that just kept going in an all-night struggle. A metaphor for tenacious faith.  
  
Jacob was many things and perhaps not quite the hero we would have expected as father of the nation.  
  
Today’s passage is, I think, an insight into his faith and personality and that he was a person who struggled with both.   
  
Yet, the best is drawn out of him, just as God can and does draw the best out of us. That often happens through love, yet surprisingly maybe, it can also occur through struggle. Maybe it is in the ‘night time of our fears’, when, in the words of John Bunyan, we face *the hobgoblins and foul fiends* of our life, in these moments of struggle, which might even scar us, we discover the best of ourselves in the context of the faithfulness of an ever present God who shares the struggles with us.  
  
Whatever our questions, remember Jacob, and never give up asking them.  
  
May it be so in the name of God who accepts us, challenges us and walks, every day, beside us – whatever the struggles we are going through. Amen  
Ian Green Amersham: 17th October 2025