

St Mary Abbots
Trinity 4, Matins
Genesis 32: 9-30, Mark 7:1-23
Mother Emma

Jacob has sent his wives, his children, his flocks and his servants ahead of him across the river by night, as he journeys back towards the elder brother he has cheated of his birthright, a story those of us who were here at Matins two weeks ago will remember. As Jacob brings up the rear, preparing to cross the river, and full of trepidation about the way Esau may react, a mysterious stranger suddenly appears out of the darkness and they wrestle together until the coming of dawn.

It is the culmination of the narrative which we have been following over the past few weeks and it allows Jacob, having stolen his father's blessing from his brother, to be redeemed by the blessing of God himself.

It is, of course, also the beginning of the story of the people of Israel, as God re-names Jacob with the name his chosen people and their land bear to this day.

Many ancient myths involve human beings contending with the Gods, and as a result coming away with some kind of deal or promise of gain. Yet, although there are echoes of this kind of legend when Jacob asks for a blessing in return for letting the stranger go, we are not left with the sense that Jacob has really gained the upper hand. We are told that Jacob "prevails" against his mystery assailant, and yet it is Jacob who walks away limping from his dislocated hip. And the stranger refuses to bless him straightaway, instead asking his name.

In Biblical times, to know and use someone's name was to know their very essence, with all the power which this entails, and this is what Jacob's assailant is requiring – moreover, he then tells Jacob that his name is to be changed to Israel, meaning "one who strives with God", revealing his power as he becomes the one who not only knows but GIVES a name to Jacob.

We might be reminded of the line from Isaiah found in modern liturgies of baptism and confirmation, "God has called you by name and made you his own." When Jacob, however, asks for the stranger's name he is not given it. After all, the clue has come in the name he has given Jacob – Jacob has striven with God – and Jacob himself becomes aware that he has seen and wrestled with God face to face.

It is only at the end of their encounter that Jacob is blessed, and the blessing stolen from Esau is transformed into a true blessing from God for Israel and for all that he and his descendants would become. Through their struggle he has been cleansed and the scene is set for his reconciliation with Esau in the next chapter.

At the beginning of our reading, Jacob's mind is full of his encounter with Esau, how to pacify him and sort things out; concern about the journey and the encroaching night. His focus is entirely self-orientated. But the idea that a mysterious figure of great strength will suddenly appear and wrestle with him all night is not at all what he is prepared for.

During this most extraordinary week in British politics and life, we have seen countless people struggling or wrestling with major decisions or challenges they might not have been anticipating.

The word "integrity" has become the word of the week, as people have sought to uphold and protect their own sense of integrity, to speak out against what they consider to be a lack of integrity in others, and to wrestle with their own consciences in interpreting what integrity in a current and apparently changing context might look like. Perhaps it is highly topical that our reading from the Gospel of

Mark today recalls Jesus' criticisms of those who claim they never break the rules, but who fail to live out the Spirit of the Law.

The Pharisees attack Jesus on the grounds that his disciples do not observe the ritual handwashing before eating prescribed by the Scriptures. Jesus rounds on them angrily, quoting from Isaiah:

This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

He goes on to rebuke them by saying that it is not what goes into a person, which defiles them, even if it is somehow seen as ritually unclean, but rather what comes out: their words and their visible actions. Covetousness, deceit, pride and foolishness are among the evil things he lists as coming out of a man and defiling him. He does not believe that integrity for the Pharisees should look like a close observance of the minor details of the Hebrew teachings, which he says were laid down by human beings, but rather a wholehearted understanding and enactment of the purposes of God.

I expect that many of you, like me, have found yourselves involved this week in lots of wide-ranging discussions about what integrity looks like and stands for. To what extent do our values govern our actions and our perception of the world around us?

Two weeks ago, we heard that Jacob demonstrated a distinct lack of what we might see as integrity, in disguising himself as his brother in order to steal their father's blessing, an act of greed and deceit. The Pharisees appear to spend their time using quotations from the Scriptures to justify their lack of compassion towards others, with the example given of their own parents.

Many of us may be familiar with the prayer, often used by choristers and based on the quotation we have heard from Isaiah: *Grant that what we proclaim with our lips, we may believe in our hearts; and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives.*

Integrity is precisely this; it is the opposite of hypocrisy – the living out in our lives of everything we proclaim with our lips.

Jacob's lack of such integrity led him into a struggle with God, and many of us may find that we too are sometimes challenged as we seek to live out the Christian principles we espouse. Yet if we can mould our lives to demonstrate truly the values we proclaim, we, like Jacob, shall find that we are richly blessed.