

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 2020

“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Does the story of Jacob, sleeping in the open with a stone for his pillow, sound a bit uncomfortable? Sleeping rough in a rocky place. Actually, examples of stone pillows have been found in ancient Egypt, and wooden pillows were common in the ancient world – and still are in some eastern cultures. Not so uncomfortable perhaps. But Jacob was anxious about meeting his brother Esau.

Jacob was not a particularly nice man. He was a cheat. Jacob was on the run from the anger of his twin brother Esau whom Jacob had outwitted, twice. He did not stop moving until sunset and then he had to stop.

When Jacob fell asleep he had a vivid dream with a ladder stretching between earth and heaven; and God speaking to Jacob, promising to be with him always, and also that one day he would return home. When Jacob woke he knew that something extraordinary had happened.

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He called that place Bethel, from the Hebrew **bet** - house of, and **El** - God. Jacob promised that he would be true to God and give a tenth of any possessions he acquired to him.

One of the conclusions you can draw from this story is that God loves even despicable cheats like Jacob. After a bad start to his life Jacob was given a new start. The life of Jacob went on to become one of the great stories of the Jewish people.

But more than that, it seems that often in the narrative of the Old Testament God chooses the other one, the unlikely one - the younger brother, the son of the barren woman or the woman beyond bearing years, or the youngest of seven brothers, in the case of David, and the one looking after the sheep, which was seen as a low status chore.

God chooses Jacob.

In the Gospel reading today the parable of Jesus concerns an enemy who sowed weed seed in a good crop, where it sprouted among the wheat. The workers ask to be allowed to go and pull out the weeds. The owner says no; you will root up some good wheat as well. Wait until harvest. Then the wheat can be saved and the weeds stacked up and burned.

When we see what we perceive as weeds in the community of the church; the teachings we reckon are not right, the people some find doctrinally or morally offensive, the ways of worship which are not to our liking, the tendency is to rush in and get rid of them.

Clean up the church! Get rid of the heretics and sinners! Jesus' answer from this parable is that God decides - not us.

You could say that Jacob was a bit of a weed, a disgrace to his grandparents Sarah and Abraham. It would have been easier to let the young offender just disappear.

Instead Jacob is granted the vision at Bethel, receives the promise of God's presence with him, and he makes his promises to God.

The parable of Jesus tells us to wait until the harvest. Then what is wheat and what is weed will be clearly seen. The owner will know the right time. He knows what is truly wheat and what is truly weed. I can only imagine that at the harvest there will be quite a surprise.

A second thing that is notable from the story of Jacob is that God came to him in a most unexpected situation.

In later times, the prophet Isaiah would see the glory of God in the golden temple at Jerusalem.

Not so with Jacob. That night, as the fugitive dropped to the ground, the God of his people seemed far away. Jacob had been on the run. He was determined to see his brother again, it was dangerous. His brother may not want to see him. Esau may react violently. Jacob has sent his family to a safe place. He was alone. However, what Jacob actually found was a place where God was very close to him; he called this place "the house of God".

"Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven"

Wherever you are this morning, in whatever mental space concerning this Covid 19 situation – the Lord is in that place.

Whatever the situation you are in - anxiety, suffering, sickness, worried about your employment, overwhelmed at the way the world seems to be going, living in broken relationships or in loneliness, or whatever the human condition is for you at the moment – God is in that place.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus there is in fact no space in our lives where the Lord cannot be present .We simply need to admit his grace and forgiveness.

The commitment of God is total. God remains faithful to be there for us. God is present in every place and situation. Sometimes we may be aware of the holy presence. Often we are not.

No matter how hard the territory you are in, no matter how alone we feel, no matter how much anguish or grief you suffer: *“Surely the Lord is in this place; though I did not know it.”*

The Gospel today tells us that God will be present in others, even with those we may not like, those who discomfort us, irritate us, or appear to be irreligious. Rocky times, rocky situations, rocky people, are no barrier to God.

Sometimes we would prefer a community of faith with no conflict and no difficult or needy people. In fact, people like us.

Apart from the fact that such a community would be utterly unrealistic. It is not ours to choose. After all, God chooses. He chose Jacob of all people. He chooses us and He is with us.

May the God who accompanied all the saints and holy ones of the Old and New Testament in their journey of faith, assure you that He is with you in this time of challenge. **Amen.**