

Genesis 28:11-18

We had a conversation about how you begin a sermon the other day. 'O that is easy' said Mrs Hoyle, 'all your sermons begin "In 1555, something interesting happened..." So let's stick with what we know. In 1555, if you walked into an English parish church the thing that would have caught your eye would have been the rood screen. That is a rood screen behind me, put up by the Victorians. In the sixteenth century it would have been wooden and painted with saints and it would have had a great crucifix towering above it. Christ hanging from the nails of the cross, and either side of him statues of his mother and St John. In the reign of Edward VI, when England became a protestant country, things changed. All across the country there was the sound of splintering wood and shattering glass as the statues of the saints and the stained glass windows with pictures of popes came crashing down. And down too came all those roods, all those great crosses in our churches.

Then, Edward VI died and Queen Mary came to the throne. She was a Catholic and saints and roods were suddenly back in fashion. The order came that they must be restored. Now that was a problem, crosses and the statues take time and they cost money. In Ludham, in Norfolk, they solved the problem rather neatly. They didn't make a new cross and carve a new Christ, instead they boarded up the chancel arch and they painted it with cross, and Mary, and John, and for good measure two angels, and a soldier with a spear. You can see them there still, and, with them one more figure. There, forever worshipping at Christ's cross, is the benefactor who paid for the painting. He had themselves painted in. He added himself into the story of salvation.

Even then they had not finished at Ludham because Queen Mary died and protestant Elizabeth came to the throne. Crosses had to come down again. They had had enough at Ludham. They just turned the boards round and painted the royal coat of arms on the side you could see from the nave. At the altar the priest could still the catholic side and that man who had crept into Calvary, joined the story.

Now with thoughts of getting in on the story of salvation we turn to our first reading, Genesis and Jacob's ladder. Let's remind ourselves about Jacob. Before our story begins he has already cheated Esau out of his inheritance and then he has stolen Esau's blessing by dressing up in borrowed clothes to trick their father. After our story, he will wrestle with an angel. Here is a man who knows what he wants and knows how to get it. He is impetuous; he is ruthless, if he lived in Charlotte Street he would have an ASBO.

Notice though, in our story Jacob is in trouble. He has been sent on a journey, away from his own people. He has been sent to Paddan-aram to get a wife. Everything depends upon this journey. If Jacob is to amount to anything, if he is to be anything he must have children. That is the way Genesis works. Genesis, is the book of beginnings, and we need to know that the beginnings will lead somewhere. Only if Jacob has children will he know that God's blessing is on him, only in his children will he leave a name behind him. On the success or failure of this journey hangs all that Jacob is or will be, is the story going to continue?

It is a breath-taking journey he makes, from south of the Dead Sea, through Israel and Syria, to the borders of Turkey. He is cut off from his family, and more importantly he is cut off from God. All the places where he knew God are far behind him; all the things the family did to find God are long gone. Jacob, who is used to getting his own way, is now out of the way of things. Fifty miles into his journey he stops in the highlands north of Jerusalem.

There, as we all know, he falls asleep and dreams of a ladder set up into heaven. It is important to understand what is going on here. Jacob is the man who has plotted against his brother not once, but twice, Jacob plans, he arranges things. Now he is caught unawares. He has a vision of God in a place he has stumbled on, by chance, a place where God is not expected, not known. Jacob is surprised and suddenly the world he knows is overturned. Against all the odds, in a wilderness, he finds that this is none other than the house of God. He names that place 'Beth-El', that means 'the House of God'.

What do we learn from Jacob? Two things. Firstly, however competent and organised and determined we are, we are never fully in control. Canon Robert, if he was here might have something to say about how fragile we are as human beings. That is a practical point, not a theological one. We encounter moments, illness, heartbreak, poverty... when we all suddenly recognise that we are limited. The theological idea is that we are created, not manufactured. Our beginnings and endings and the judgements made about us lie beyond our grasp. I can make a pie, it would not be very nice, but I could make a pie. I would know it from beginning to end, I could eat it or throw it away. It is mine. My life is not the same at all. I had no say at its beginning; others make judgements have a stake in it. Life is not our possession we do not have it in our grasp. I do not entirely *own* my life, There is a community of values around me and I do not have the last word on what I am and what I might become. A good deal of end of life debate at the moment is about our rights over ourselves and we are hearing important things said by those who face terrible illness. But the debate about assisted dying is not just about rights. It is also a conversation about power and possession; who owns a life, who decides when life is not worth living and how? The story of Jacob, at Beth-El, is a story about the *limits* of power and possession.

There is some inevitable humour at our expense at the moment. Critic saying that Christians believe in the after-life but as soon someone suggests assisted dying it seems that we are in no hurry to get there. The implication is that we do not take the suffering of the terminally ill seriously and that we are not confident in our own promises. I think it is precisely our *seriousness* that is the issue, but it is our seriousness about life *and* death. We know that human beings are fallible and make terrible decisions about life and death, the cross is precisely the witness to that truth. We are the people who tried to kill the love of God. Anxiety about assisted dying is not a knee jerk reaction that suffering is something you have to put up with. It is rooted in anxiety about the way we make decisions. The church is asking questions about how we can treat life with reverence, how we sustain the conviction that life is not just another possession?

It is reverence that Jacob learns at Beth-El, the reverence that comes from being surprised by the height and depth of things. Even in a Cathedral the assurance that we can summon God and name him can run away with us. Our stones and glass, our strategy, account books and Chapter minutes are all signs of that confidence we have in ourselves. All of this is only possible however, because, years ago, on a hillside, outside the city walls, the glory of God burnt out from a cross. Unexpected, unlooked for, God broke into our history and we have been rewriting the record ever since. That is precisely the lesson that Jacob learnt at Bethel. We need to remember that we are still people who can be surprised.

That's the first lesson. The second is to notice what Jacob then did at Bethel. In that strange and remote place Jacob saw something unexpected, and yet he had no hesitation in naming it. 'This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven'. That is our task still. Faith cannot know God, it cannot describe his face, or number off all his attributes. Faith does not know God. The best that faith can do is to be surprised occasionally, catch a glimpse of God and then name it. We would find it easier if faith could be worked in a series of tasks we could tick, spiritual exercises to fit in between the gym and the shopping. It is not like that, most of the time, like Jacob, we are catching up with God, fitting some new experience, new event, new challenge into the little we know. What does it mean to have a faith? It means you look forward in hope, it means you look around and pray, and it means you lack back in forgiveness. Faith is the stubborn confidence that, despite some of the evidence, future, present and past belong to God. We look for the signs of his presence. 'This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven'.

Let me take you back to Ludham and the painting of Mary and John at the foot of the cross, and that cocky benefactor watching the Lord of Life being put to death. Tempted to take ourselves too seriously, to make ourselves the story, we gather here this morning to hear tell of history of salvation. We are given grace, we hold out empty hands. This is the limit of what we know and the promise that there is more in the generosity of God. Here we take our place within that story, paint ourselves a corner seat at Calvary and in the Easter garden. Here we recognise the height and depth and give thanks that *liofe* is more than we can make it by ourselves.