

THE WRESTLER: A Sermon for Sunday Aug 6, 2017

The Very Rev. Ken Gray

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

While I have no plans for a change of profession, I sometimes wonder if I could ever become a professional wrestler. The obvious requirement for physical exercise passed over for now, the first requirement would be to find a good name. "Casper" comes to mind, a childhood taunt. "Mean Dean" is also possible.

In sports, as in other areas of life, names are important. In today's latest installment of the Jacob saga, Jacob crosses the Jabbok, a sonorous wordplay in Hebrew. Jacob wrestles with a man who remains frustratingly un-identified. This mysterious "man" (no ordinary human) re-names Jacob as Israel (God contended, prevailed etc.), for he is to become the patriarch of twelve tribes and eventually a great nation. As Jacob's name is clarified the reverse is not true; Jacob's repeated question as to the identity of his assailant remains elusive and unanswered.

We use names to describe ourselves and to clarify our vocation. Peter Gardiner was once a gardener, and Thomas Baker was once a baker. Often names signify attributes; for instance, Ken means handsome. Names speak to presence, identity, competence, attitude and in Hebrew scripture to one's faith outlook.

Jacob's story is complex and hardly an example of virtuous living. If Jacob finds himself in a struggle amidst the darkness, his own nefarious activities have placed him there, not for punishment, but certainly for reflection and deep engagement. There's no better place than the dark for critical personal reflection. How many times have I woken early in the morning, my mind stirring with questions about things done and left undone. Things simply seem worse at 4 a.m. It can be a challenge some days to rise and face the day. Likewise Jacob.

Time waits for no one, and the sun will rise on cue, hopefully one day no longer refracted through smoke. The pressure for resolution increases as dark cracks the horizon. And the goal, for Jacob, for myself and likely for yourselves, is some kind of resolution, a blessing, an assurance that "all shall be well" or "I am not alone" or "Come Lord Jesus, renew the face of the earth." Healing and hope can arrive via a

new attitude, a reinforced trust, a sign of acceptance, an affirmation of genuine community.

But still . . . still, there is this injured hip. As with every medication in the bathroom medicine cabinet, every drug seems to have a powerful side-effect, darn it. For Jacob and for us, there is no decisive victory unaccompanied by some small pain; no free ride, no cosmic bliss to obliterate memory or sorrows. Life is an existential reality. History is now published; what matters is how we next move forward. The hip is injured, permanently (likewise St. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" or Jesus' tears for Jerusalem or the agony in Gethsemane's garden). The hip socket is sore, as only those seeking a hip replacement can well describe.

The injury however is not ultimate; the real need is to find blessing – which we could call contentment, satisfaction, focus, meaning . . . every age describes the goal and the need differently though the two are related. The need for blessing is constant. "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." These are likely the most declamatory words in the bible. I will not let you go, you who struggle against me. It's a curious coupling. If God is unhelpful, why not look elsewhere. Many do. Not Jacob. To God alone he turns for comfort and community. And God accedes to his plea, strangely, conditionally, but eventually.

And now we're back to the name, Israel, which means resilience, so defined because of Jacob's resilience, which can likewise be ours. I am a huge fan of Stephen Lewis, Canadian politician and former UN Envoy for the African AIDS crisis. He addressed the 2004 General Synod which I attended. One way or another, he has visited Africa every year since 1957. When asked what attracts him to Africa, he offers one word, resilience. No matter what happens, Lewis says, (most) Africans can find a way forward. I seek this same spirit for myself and for you as well.

As a way of summarizing my reflection I have written a short hymn with which I draw my homily to a close. I hope you find something of value here.

I will not let you go,
O God of day and night,
I will not lose my hope in your

Amazing love;
Each step in every day
Accompanied by you;
Reveals my wish, my need
Your blessing to receive.

From dawn to darkest night,
In all my daily round,
I limp, though injured t'ward what lies
Before me now;
I know not where to turn,
My eye cannot foresee,
What cause, what end, what means, what change
Will come to me.

Your company I keep
For others leave me lost,
Our fellowship brings strength and gain
My spirit breathes.
Your welcome presence now,
In past and future days
Brings reconciling love and light
To darkest gloom

You will not let me go,
My striving brings you joy;
Your blessing comes, my health restored
My life preserved.
In all things great and small,
Your presence near I find;
Your healing, helping, saving love
My joy complete.