A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Raw Faith

In his powerful yet short book, 'Praying the Psalms' Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who spoke so eloquently and loquaciously of spirituality to the baby-boomer generation, asks why the church is so very keen on the recitation of the psalms. 'Is it,' he asks, 'because they are ancient, venerable poems?' Does our commitment to them 'come out of conservative refusal to change?' He also considers some other options but then says that the Church does indeed like what it is old but not because it is old but because it is 'young'. His point is that ancient texts such as the psalms matter to us because they are unrefined, unvarnished, and unpolished. They represent humanity's relationship with God in a pre-theological, not yet over-thought, hyper-wordy and super-self-conscious form that is more typical of more recently written words that try to express something of spirituality. They are of value because they are primitive and raw; like the love letters that people used to write, they come from an early stage in the relationship. When the psalms were written God and humanity didn't know each other very well – it was an era of courtship that saw the expression of lofty ideals but was defined by passionate feelings.

Moreover the psalms are words of exploration, experimentation and discovery. The poets who wrote the psalms did not sit down with either the end of their psalm in mind or a formula to hand. This is one reason why the psalms are not at all Mills and Boon and why even in their most emotional they do not descend into doggerel or sentimentality. This is also why the psalms are often far more robust, abrupt and uncompromising in

what they want to say and how they say it than are hymns or contemporary worship songs.

The psalms have guts, emotional and spiritual guts, and if every now and then there are redolent with 'blood and guts' that is because life itself was often bloody; and if there are protests in the psalms it is because life was unfair and if there are laments it's because life was sometimes deeply unhappy. And for many people life is bloody, unfair and unhappy today. The book of psalms is not a book that would be out of place on a battlefield or in a psychiatric prison or a hospice or a refugee camp. Certainly we hear them sung here every day at our services but that doesn't mean that they were crafted to entertain us at Evensong. We recite them because our tradition recognises the truth that pearls of wisdom are not found wrapped up in cellophane but have to be prised out of oysters that themselves have to gathered by divers who risk their lungs and their lives with perilous plunges to unfathomable depths. The psalms remind us that holy truths are dangerous to get and priceless to own. As Merton puts it,

> In the Psalms we drink divine praise at its pure and stainless source, in all its primitive sincerity and perfection. We return to the youthful strength and directness with which the ancient psalmists voiced their adoration of the God of Israel. Their adoration was intensified by the ineffable accents of a new discovery: for the Psalms are songs of men (sic) who *knew who God was*.

What Merton says here about the psalms can help us not only with understanding those extraordinary poems, but also when we read the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, not least the first among them, the book of Genesis from which our first lesson today was taken.

Here we find the patriarch, the old man, Jacob. A scoundrel if ever there was one, who tricked his brother Esau out of his inheritance and went on to rule the family roost. He was for many years a nomadic farmer, and fathered a long string of children by wives and slaves. Despite the fact that Jacob was famously a 'smooth' man (Genesis 27.11) the word 'rough' doesn't come close when thinking about the habits or manners of a man like Jacob. Never mind the ethics. He was hated by his brother Esau (Genesis 27.41) and doubtless feared by many. But like his youngest son Joseph Jacob was a dreamer. His first dream was at a place he called 'Bethel'. It was here that he dreamt of, 'a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.' When he awoke Jacob said,

> Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

The stories of Jacob and his dysfunctional family are part of this early exploration of what it means for a human being to live in some sort of relationship with God. The story that was our first lesson today represents another phase in that relationship. Again it happens at night when the world is dark and mysterious and the human mind is not controlled by the boundaries that usually constrain our imaginations. It is a far less peaceful encounter than the one at Bethel. It is basically a fight - some kind of spiritual wrestling match.

> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

It was a wounding fight and left Jacob with a limp; his inability to walk properly being a reminder of this encounter with the divine. But it was Jacob who was the better wrestler and it is the angelic visitor who asks to be released. But the tough old patriarch would not let the angel go just like that and asked for blessing.

It turns out that Jacob's blessing was to have his name changed, a name change that recognized precisely his power and persistence as a fighter. Jacob responds to the experience as he did at Bethel by renaming the place. He called it 'Peniel'. The final line perhaps reads as something of an anti-climax. Jacob says, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' To summarise such a nocturnal scrap as seeing someone 'face to face' is to understate the physicality, intimacy and vulnerability of the encounter. But the point is basic. A human being faced God straight on, and yet lived to tell the tale, indeed to walk away, albeit with a limp.

In more modern times it's unlikely that people would describe their spiritual experiences in any of these terms. The Wesleyan idea of having your heart strangely warmed is much closer to what people expect out of a divine encounter. But the ancient scriptures are not polite or inwardly spiritual so much as raw and rough and basic and exploratory. Reading them we should be prompted to think that some of our more difficult, sustained and damaging life-struggles were in fact struggles with angels and that our encounters with God are evident not in the way we run, skip, jump or dance, but in the way we limp towards the future, wounded and yet strangely blessed by our encounters with God.

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Genesis 32.22-31; Luke 18.1-8