



Service for Personal or Private Use Sunday 2nd August 2020

As we come to worship, read Psalm 145

Ps 145:8-9

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

In the Ignatian tradition, we are encouraged to begin a time of prayer by placing our self in God's presence, considering God's care for us... one way is to imagine God's gaze of great love upon us.

As we come to worship this day, can you imagine God looking on you with steadfast, compassionate love?

Hymn: Great is thy faithfulness, O God my father (StF 15, H&P 66, **MP**)

Our prayer continues to be shaped by Psalm 145...let us pray...

Holy God, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
You are good to all, your compassion is over all that you have made.
You uphold all who are falling, and raise us up when we are bowed down.

We look to you for care and compassion, and you feed us as we need
You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.
You are just in all your ways, and kind in all your doings.
You are near to all who call on you, you fulfil the desire of all who hold you in awe and hear
the cry of those who have need of you
You bring salvation, watching over all who love you

Knowing all these things we will speak your praise and bless your holy name forever and ever.

Knowing all these things, we entrust to you our faults and failings, our fears and doubts...

Pause

God is love
Through Jesus our sins are forgiven
Let us live in the power of the Spirit today, and every day
Thanks be to God. Amen

Our next passages of scripture for reflection will be familiar to many of us, and provide us with detailed descriptions of events which we may find ourselves able to imagine as we read. As we read today, can we look on those whose story we catch a glimpse of in our readings with the same steadfast, compassionate love as we have imagined God offering to us? Can we wonder about what is happening within and around them without a hint of judgement, but simply seeking understanding? Dare we also turn our own loving gaze back towards God, towards Jesus, as we read and reflect?

Bible reading: Genesis 32:22-31

Bible reading: Matthew 14:13-21

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for our souls. Amen

If we have followed the Old Testament lectionary over the past few weeks, we might have been following Jacob's story from the middle of the book of Genesis. A couple of weeks ago we might have spent time with Jacob seemingly alone on a journey, and watched with him as he dreamed of the link between heaven and earth, maybe re-finding for ourselves the awe of knowing that God is in this place, and that place, and in every place and with us always...

Today we are in Jacob's company again as something extraordinary happens. Jacob is on a journey now towards his brother Esau...the brother who he tricked out of the blessing that was his birthright, and who he has not seen for years and years. Jacob has made contact with him and sent gifts on ahead, seeking a reconciliation...

And Jacob is alone. He has sent the servants and the gifts on. He has even sent his wives, his maidservants, and his children over the river...and he has made sure he is quite alone. Why? Of course we will never know for sure...but we might wonder if he needs the solitude to get ready for a meeting which is filling him with fear. He has already made his prayer to God "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children". Maybe now he is taking this opportunity to gather all his courage. Some even suggest that he is struggling with the very process of forgiveness and reconciliation which he is about to embark upon. A process which is not yet a fundamental part of what it means to be one of God's people, as it is for us as Christian people...

Alone, he finds himself wrestling with a man. They are so evenly matched that they wrestle all night without a victor, even though the man strikes Jacob and dislocates his hip. Jacob demands a blessing...and is gifted both a new name and the understanding that it is God with whom he has wrestled all night...

It's quite a story, and if you are anything like me it raises all kinds of questions. Just one, maybe, is something about what it means for Jacob and the one God who is with us always to be so well matched in this struggle. What is going on here...?

Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar and poet, suggests that here we discover that Jacob is no ordinary man, God is no ordinary God and this is no ordinary story. This is not like anything that has gone before...not like anything we might assume about this meeting. This encounter will not allow us to make the simple assumption that God is strong, and Jacob is weak...or even that our expectations are turned on their head and God is weak in the face of Jacob's struggle. In the naming of Israel (which means something like God rules, God preserves, God protects...or the one who wrestles or prevails with God), we begin to see something new about the relationship between God and God's people. We cannot tell if the wrestling stranger leaves in his freedom or if Jacob allows him to go...there is still mystery here. Brueggemann says "God remains God, his hiddenness intact...but Jacob is no longer Jacob. Now he is Israel..."

I find myself wondering about the possibility that this wrestling is part of the journey towards living the process of reconciliation. God reframing the old truths about power and weakness into a much more delicate and complex pattern...a pattern which is already beginning to contain space for the possibility that power might be made perfect in weakness. Is this a wrestling match which somehow prepares Jacob to receive the renewed relationship which Esau will offer...and allows him to see God at work in the meeting between them?

As we come to our gospel passage, the mystery of who and how God is, seems to me to be at the fore again...

“Now when Jesus heard this...”

We need to look back in the text to see that Jesus has just heard that John the Baptist has been executed. The one who recognised him, who knew him, who had the clear sight of a prophet and the care of a cousin...is dead... and Jesus seeks a deserted place to be alone. But the crowd follow him...and in his compassion (a powerful word in itself, meaning something like ‘to suffer with’), in his presence with them in their suffering, he heals. Jesus ‘cures their sick’, or another translation might read, ‘he serves their weak’.

And it gets late...very late....and in that lonely place people are hungry...

There are echoes in both of our stories of the desert temptations of Jesus...and yet each is so very different...Jacob does not wrestle with Satan, but with God...and does not emerge as secure in his identity, but as a changed man...

Jesus is not tempted to change stones into bread...but instead sees the potential of partnership to make what seems like so little in the face of the need that the disciples call it ‘nothing but’.... nothing but five loaves and two fish...to make this enough and to spare. Jesus in partnership with the disciples feed the multitude...

The interplay between power and weakness...who has what, and who can do what, and what is possible with just a little... is much more complex in Jacob’s interactions with the mysterious stranger, with Jesus’ interaction with the disciples and the crowd, than in many stories told around the camp fire...

Here is God who not just in this place or that place, but in every place...not just with one people, but with all people...in all times. God who is with us always. Here is God who is rewriting the stereotypes of power and weakness, of strength and vulnerability in every encounter. Here is God who is calling us to have confidence in the mystery that God chooses to wrestle with us, chooses to work outside the ordinary story...chooses to work in and through both power and vulnerability. Here is God who chooses to invite and *require* us to be active in serving the needs of the world...

St Ignatius of Loyola, whose guide to prayer we drew on right at the beginning of our reflections, defines ‘love’ as ‘mutual communication between two persons’, each offering to the other what they do not have, each sharing with the other.

How will our reflection with Jacob’s encounter with the stranger, and Jesus’ compassionate encounter with the crowds and the disciples, shape our living and our loving in our place this week?

Loving God, you built your church,
the body of Christ, as living stones.
As we are shaped by your love this day,
help us to remember that we are your people in every place.
Form us in the likeness of your Son, and send us out in the power of your Spirit,
to witness in your world. Amen

Hymn: For the healing of the nations (StF 696, H&P 402, **MP**)

As we come to our prayers for others, and for ourselves, we use our imagination to gradually focus from the global to the local... allowing space for us to hold people and places in compassionate love...allowing space for us to offer the prayers of our hearts to God...

We may choose to use the refrain

*Loving God
to you we trust our prayer*

between moments of silence, to shape a rhythm of prayer...

Let us pray...

We hold before God the clearest image we have of our planet...aware that we add our voices to those of so many others...praying for the earth and her peoples...

We hold before God just one situation which we know of, or we have heard of in the international news, which concerns us beyond the shores of this country...

We pray for this nation...for those who exercise power, and for those who feel themselves powerless...show us how to live together, bearing one another's burdens, working together for justice and peace...

We hold before God our city...and all those who seek the common good in the life of this place...

We pray for the area in which we live... holding before God one situation which has concerned us locally this week...

We pray for those people who are particularly on our hearts and minds this day...

And as we pray for ourselves, we offer ourselves to God this day...holding our needs before God...recalling that all that we have and all that we are is gift from God...offering our gifts of time and talent, prayer and praise, love and care, resources...for use in the service of God's kingdom...

...and we draw our prayers together in the words of the **Lord's Prayer**...

Hymn: Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go (StF 550, H&P 381, **MP**)

May we and those we love,
those for whom we pray,
recognise the blessing of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
this day and every day,
in friend, and stranger,
And all God's good creation

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.