

Struggling with God

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 16 October 2022

St Philip's Anglican Church, O' Connor ACT Australia

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Genesis 32: 22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3: 10-4:5; Luke 18: 1-14

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

For so many people life's a struggle—and for all of us, at least some of the time, if the truth be known. For younger people, childhood and adolescence can be a struggle, and increasingly so in recent years. Why is Harry Potter so popular? —because children recognise their own fears, challenges and difficulties in these stories, but also that reliable powers are available to help them. We know that buying a home and raising a family is often a struggle, that jobs and careers can be full of struggle, and so too many marriages. Being a parent can be a struggle, with childhood, adolescence and young adulthood revealing new dimensions. Physical and mental health are a struggle for many, as is life for the disabled, those with chronic illnesses and so often for the elderly. The bereaved, along with the unemployed and the victims of injustice, are well acquainted with struggle. And then there are those of whom we're increasingly aware, struggling to find a foothold in newly fluid conditions of sexuality and gender. So many can make the words of that song their own: "I know all there is to know about the crying game".

And yet people find help and strength to face these struggles, don't they? Indeed, confidence in that help and strength is the main testimony that ordinary Christians can and do give to their faith: that it helps them to get through. There's a very real sense in which our Eucharist together is the breakfast of champions: that, in a life oriented by word and sacrament, we grow in resilience.

Today in our readings life with God is portrayed in terms of struggle, which is hardly what a lot of Christians expect to hear. They prefer a religion that's relaxed and comfortable, that helps them feel good about themselves, like that self-satisfied pharisee who Jesus ridicules in today's Gospel. He's very pleased with his place at the pinnacle of religious rectitude, with no inner struggle, and no need for help from God let alone for mercy. He's like all those who tell us priests that they're good people, so they don't need to go to Church, or like Anglicans of a certain age that I've known who think that sin means crime—that it's nothing to do with respectable householders and taxpayers like them. There's no sense of struggle for any of these—no sense that growth toward a mature identity in Christ involves challenge, difficulty and being displaced from their comfort zone.

This is why the tax collector in our Gospel today is closer to the mark: because he knows that things in his heart and his life aren't as they should be, and so he reaches out to God who he knows will help him. Likewise, Jacob in that classic reading about becoming Israel, but also about the spiritual life, that we have from Genesis this morning.

Who'd describe the spiritual life, or the vocation of God's people, or the Church's mission, in terms of a wrestling match? Who'd put that up on the butcher's paper at our parish planning day (though I'm told we won't be having butcher's paper!)? But there it is, struggling with God *mano a mano*, and only in that struggle coming to see God face to face—without dying, yes, but certainly not without consequences, not without a limp and some bruises. Yet only thus does Jacob find his way to becoming Israel. Only thus do we find out who we most truly are.

Indeed, the promise of help and mercy that's there in our Gospel and our psalm today—and in our Epistle with its pep-talk to a young colleague starting out in ministry—is a promise that wouldn't need to be made if everything's going to be easy and straightforward. And especially not in ministry, with that Epistle reading in mind. How many young clergy in our Church are taught to expect that ministry and especially preaching is going to involve a contest of ideas that never ends, with persecution as their regular reward for facing up to what needs doing? Or that scripture if used properly means a demanding workout for we clergy ourselves rather than a path of easy reassurance that we're in the right and beyond criticism, which is how Scripture serves for many clergy in other parts of our Church? This is the line that I took with ordination candidates when I worked in theological education, and I still do in my mentoring of younger clergy, though it's not something they tend to hear from any other quarter.

So, friends, the life of faith is a struggle with a loving and faithful God. Many Christians in churches more popular than ours are told something different, while many of our own clergy have settled for the line of least resistance, serving parishes that are full of the relaxed and comfortable. But where do we find a hint of that in our readings today, or in our Eucharist where God's own struggles for our sake are centre stage? Every struggle brings bruises and even injuries—we can even boast about them, as our Epistle writer does today. Better that than being Teflon Christians, smug and superior, like the pharisee character in today's Gospel parable, who Jesus gives a good slap.

The Lord be with you ...