

20 October 2019

Genesis 32.22-31

Luke 18.1-8

Worth fighting for?

I have given the sermon today the title, 'Worth fighting for?'

I am slightly reluctant to use this language because I don't want to give any kind of legitimacy to the use of physical violence in our support of the Christian faith.

A few weeks ago there was a debate in the British media about the use of language in politics.

In particular it was the use of language that drew on war-time imagery.

- The back-bench bill in Parliament forcing the government to request an extension to Article 50 tabled by Hilary Benn was labelled the surrender act.
- Any MP that was making the case for the delay of Brexit or its revocation was labelled a 'collaborator'.

And at a time when some people were suggesting that the Brexit debate (or is it debacle?) could lead to public disorder, it was suggested that the use of this kind of militaristic language could encourage a public mood that leads to violence.

A similar debate took place a number of years ago in many churches about the use of militaristic language in a number of our hymns. There was concern that if we use the language of armed conflict as a metaphor or picture for living the Christian life, that it could reinforce the assumption that violence is an acceptable way of resolving differences in our world.

So when Baptist Praise and Worship replaced the former Baptist Hymn Book in 1991 hymns like *Onward Christian soldiers* were missing. And the hymn book that we use, Hymns Old and New published in 1996, *Onward Christian soldiers* was replaced by *Onward Christian pilgrims*.

I know that some people think that this is petty – political correctness gone mad. But I have to say, that it is a development that I support. I believe that the

language that we use is powerful in shaping and sustaining deeply embedded assumptions about our world. And if we want to start to live in a different kind of world, we have to use a different kind of language.

At the heart of our Christian faith is the cross of Christ, which tells us that the first port of call for Christians in changing this world has to be the way of non-violence. And if we keep on turning to military metaphors and images, of battles and victories and enemies, we are in danger of undermining the fundamental challenge of the Christian faith to the received wisdom of the world.

And yet, having said all of this, there are times when the language of fighting just cannot easily be replaced and substituted. Our life in this world pits us in all sorts of situations of conflict, and the metaphor of fighting is the best one that we have to hand.

And so, as a way of reflecting on the two passages that we have read this morning, I am going to stay with this language ... but with the very clear subtext that I am only talking about non-violent forms of struggle. 'Worth fighting for?'

And actually we cannot avoid the language of fighting in our Old Testament story, because it is the story of Jacob caught up in an overnight wrestling match, which he realised, after it was all over, was an encounter with God.

This story comes at a critical moment in Jacob's life.

Jacob was the younger of twins. His father was Isaac.

He was given the name Jacob because it means 'grasper' – he was born grasping his brother Esau's heel. He was grasper by name and grasper by nature because he did everything he could to get what was not rightfully his.

He tricked his way into getting his brother Esau to promise him his birthright, and then deceived his father Isaac into blessing him instead of Esau. By his craft and cunning he effectively stole all of Esau's rights and privileges as the first born child.

Inevitably this led to an East Ender's style family rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and Jacob had to flee the country.

But our story comes just as Jacob is preparing to return home, unsure of what kind of reception he is going to receive.

It is the night before the big reunion and Jacob sends family and servants off so that he has some time to himself.

What exactly happens?

The story only ever talks about a man coming to wrestle with Jacob ... but Christian art has often depicted this figure as an angel ... along with wings.

So was this an encounter with an angel ... or with an unknown stranger in the middle of the night

Or is this a vision that Jacob has? – and we know how some dreams feel vividly real.

A few weeks ago, I found myself in the middle of the night throwing myself out of bed – much to Sally's alarm. And I knew exactly what I was doing. I had been dreaming that I was playing rugby, and one of the opposing team was about to pass me, ball in hand. And so I made this incredible diving tackle to bring him down ... throwing myself out of bed in the process.

It was a win-win situation. The tackle was successful ... and I didn't get injured. Not quite so good for Sally – who lost the duvet rather suddenly, and was woken as I hit the floor.

It would not be surprising, in Jacob's highly charged emotional state, for everything in his life to come to the surface during this particular night.

He remembers it as a night of deep struggle, but also as a night of encounter with God ... and he comes away from it with a new name.

No longer Jacob the grasper, the deceiver, but now 'Israel' – 'he struggles with God'.

In this restless, exhausting night Jacob relived what his whole life had been about – an on-going struggle with God ... and a struggle with God that leaves him marked, but alive. And more than alive – blessed and renamed.

His dawning realisation that 'I saw God face to face, and yet was spared.' was not just an insight into what had happened that night, but was also a recognition of what has been happening throughout his life.

He has been wrestling with God and God has been wrestling with him.

This wrestling with God can take all sorts of forms ... it can be exhausting and demanding ... but it is worth getting involved.

For some of us the big struggle that we have is an intellectual struggle.

How can faith in God in our scientific and secular age make any sense? And in particular when we start asking the difficult questions about why innocent people suffer, there simply are no easy answers.

Sometimes this struggle is at a very different level. There is a kind of clash of egos going on between ourselves and God. God asks us for trust and we find trust difficult. And on two quite different levels.

On one level we really want to sort our own lives out, thank you very much. We want to be self-reliant, we want to find out what we are capable of, we don't want to be dependent.

But then on a very different level, there is that self-loathing, that tells us that that we are just not worth it, and why would God bother about us.

And our wrestling with God, becomes caught up in an internal struggle that is going on between our arrogance and our self-loathing.

But notice in this story that it is God who takes the initiative. It is God who begins this all-night wrestling match ... because he believes that Jacob is worth fighting for.

And God believes that we are worth fighting for ... and he wants us to engage with him.

Life can be tough and complex and full of all sorts of conflicts ... but our relationship with God is worth fighting for. It is worth our wrestling with God, and with everything that it means to be faithful to God in our world.

And then we have the New Testament story that Jesus tells of the feisty, determined, stubborn widow who will not let go of her fight for justice with the judge.

The judge in question is the very opposite of what a model judge should be. A judge in Israel should follow the demands of God, which Jesus summarised as 'Loving God and loving neighbour'.

This particular judge did neither – he 'neither feared God, nor cared about men.'

And yet this woman gets her way in the end with what can only be described as 'pester power'.

This is the kind of power that children know very well in the run up to Christmas.

Whatever you may think of the Extinction Rebellion protesters in London – they have the spirit of this widow.

They believe that the people in power don't really want to do anything, unless they are forced to by public pressure.

They believe that the wider public will ignore the challenge unless they are inconveniently confronted with it.

The message of the parable is not that pester power works.

The parable is rather Jesus' way of posing a challenge to his followers.

Look at this woman, who never gives up in asking for justice, even though the judge is cold-hearted, ruthless and incompetent.

And yet what are you like with God, who is loving, caring, compassionate, responsive and just?

Do you give up with the things that are deeply important to you, or do you persist?

When things don't change, do you throw your hands in the air and stop caring, or do you keep on praying, and working and wrestling with God?

What's worth fighting for in your life? What's worth working at and staying with? What's worth putting your energy and desire into?

What's worth crying out to God for?

And actually part of the struggle is working out what it is that we should be praying for, working at and struggling for ... not least because different Christians will come to different conclusions.

And part of that is right and proper.

We will all have different passions because we cannot all carry in our hearts all of the burdens of all the world. They need to be shared out, while respecting that all are valid:

- some will be committed to praying relentlessly for the persecuted Christians of the world
- some will focus on the need for justice
- some will focus on climate change
- some may focus on praying and working for peace
- some may focus on healing

Just because things get difficult, don't give up ...

Keep on wrestling with God in prayer ...