

St Mary's Stoke Newington
Licencing of Revd Prakash Thankachan
The Bishop of Stepney
16 October 2022
Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

Prakash, when you set off from India for the UK, with Margaret and Irene, I don't imagine that you could have conceived of the journey that would lie ahead: Margaret finding her role in the United Reformed Church; your search for the place where you have come to see the face of God; your wrestling with the Archbishop's office, God bless them, to get the paperwork sorted for you to be licenced from overseas as a priest in London Diocese; and then the sun rising today on a new ministry, with Dilly, and all the congregation gathered here, and the people of Stoke Newington.

I don't imagine that Jacob really knew what was coming either on his own journey into a new relationship with God: a journey where he wrestled with a man sent by God, a messenger of God; a journey where he had to continue with his own hip out of joint, no longer reliant on his own strength; and a journey where he saw God face to face and knew that his life would be preserved.

There's lots for us to reflect on in this story from Genesis, as we come together to bless and celebrate a new ministry, a collaboration, a next step for St Mary's on your faithful journey towards the face of God. Your own imaginations might be heading off in all sorts of different directions even now. Who is the man? Where does he appear from? Why does he strike Jacob on the hip socket when he can't overcome him by wrestling? Why won't he reveal his name or who he is?

Reading this passage, pondering it, grappling with it, I think I come to find my own blessings in it by realizing that Jacob's story is rather like my own relationship with God in prayer. I so often come to God in my own strength and try to do battle. I wrestle with God, ask why the world is a mess, ask why people I love are suffering with ill health, get angry and combative with God for seemingly not answering my prayers. I grapple with ideas, pulling them apart, coming at them from different angles, striving to find truth and meaning. I ask, what's this all about? And often, at least at first, nothing seems to budge. I don't give in, and God doesn't seem to give much ground either. It's a stalemate: we're locked together, and we will not let each other go.

Something only shifts when I notice that I'm limping, when I know that I am "out of joint." And in that moment, I cling on to God. Although I still want to see myself as strong and competent, although my ego is in overdrive, and although I'd probably really quite like to think that I am God, I learn that God isn't giving me that power. But God knows me, and God calls me by name. God is God. I am blessed. And so, something is unlocked. I limp on in my journey of faith.

I wonder if you ever do something similar.

And I wonder what this means for ministry, especially for Dilly and Prakash, as they seek a new collaboration in ministry together, and with all the people of St Mary's. In ministry, I think we do a lot of wrestling. (And I don't mean fighting with our colleagues: I don't anticipate that this will be a particularly tempestuous working relationship!) But I'm sure that there will be wrestling. You will grapple with the culture that's around you, thinking about how to relate to people in their everyday lives, how to know what has value, how to see what is of God. You will grapple with your own faith, who God is, how you can grow as

disciples, and grow new disciples. You will grapple with suffering, asking where God is when people die, or when you see injustice, people being left hungry or cold, left out.

It's great to have that sense of striving ceaselessly with, or being curious, or even a little demanding of God. It's real. Notice how Jacob in Genesis wants to know the man's name too. Having had his own name, Jacob, heard, and then changed to Israel, I wonder if Jacob wants the same power to name and control as God has. Certainly, he's curious and able to articulate what he wants. But the man whom Jacob is coming to see as the angel of the Lord, in whom he sees the face of God, says he won't reveal his identity. Instead, he blesses him. And by that, Jacob knows, not only that he is Israel, but also that God is God. Jacob does, in a way, get what he asked for.

Dilly, Prakash, people of St Mary's, I believe that together you will meet God's messengers, God's angels. I hope you will wrestle with them, and refuse to let them go, and demand to know their names. I'm glad that you will do this collaboratively, not in your own strength, but limping, leaning on each other, and on God. And I am certain that, like the widow in Luke's gospel, you will also advocate to God persistently, with and on behalf of those who are on the margins, downtrodden, and treated unjustly.

Luke's gospel reassures us that God will quickly grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night. God will receive your grappling and your bothering with gladness: do not be afraid to approach God and to persist. God will not delay in helping now, and the kingdom of God is a place of justice. At the same time, though, in your wrestling, do attend to this question at the end of Jesus's story: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Can you keep your faith strong? Can you help others in their own wrestling with the questions of faith, with prayer, with social action, so that God blesses them in their own new place of encounter? Can you help this community to catch sight of the face of God in Stoke Newington?

Prakash, you said to me when we spoke a few weeks ago that you'd described yourself to a friend in India as a kind of reverse missionary. We really need you to be that. We need you to bring your grace and energy and the hospitality of your faith and culture, to join with what Dilly and the people of Stoke Newington are already doing, and to seek out the angels of the Lord. As you make that journey, you will continue to be in my prayers. I am glad that we will share ministry together over the coming years.

Prakash, come, and cross the stream, cross the New River, and make Stoke Newington your home. Ministering together, as the whole people of God, may you receive God's blessings, and may you see the face of God in this place. Amen.

Genesis 32:22-31

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man[a] said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,[b] for you have striven with God and with humans[c] and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel,[d] saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Luke 18:1-8

18 Then Jesus[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' 4 For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' "[b] 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"