

Dear Friends,

GENESIS 28: 16-22

Jacob's time in a deserted, desolate place is nearly at an end. The darkness has been overcome by the light of God's presence. Jacob wakes and says, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven". He takes the big stone that he slept beside and he raises it up as a pillar and pours oil on it. He calls the place Bethel. Years later Bethel would be one of the centres of Israelite religion. People would go there and unite themselves with Jacob by pouring oil on a stone pillar. Cultic pillars like this were generally several feet tall. Jacob's single handed raising of this stone was a great feat of strength.

Jacob then makes a vow. He says, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you". Hang on a minute. God made a promise. God said, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go". In response Jacob says "If God will be with me and will keep me". There's no "if" about it. God promised. What God wants to give as a free gift, Jacob has to turn into a deal. He is saying "If you do this for me, then in return I will do the other for you". What is natural to Jacob is natural to many of us. Somewhere inside we feel that we need to become people who have earned God's acceptance, who deserve God's presence and love. We do not however need to be anxious about earning or deserving what God chooses to freely give. It is God's gift to say to you "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go".

The book of Genesis went through a series of edits. The stories were circulated, brought together passed on from generation to generation. A lot of work was put into them when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. They had lost everything. Their land, the Temple, their freedom. They wondered how it could be possible to go on singing God's songs in a strange land. But they found that they could. This must have been one of the stories to give them strength. It must have helped them to find some defiance while living amongst their powerful enemies who had humiliated them. Yes, they were far from home, but God had not abandoned them. God was still with them. God was still keeping them. We too are passing through traumatic times. We too may find comfort and strength in knowing that God says, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go".

Many years later, Jesus looked back on the story of Jacob's stairway and said this to one of his friends "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man". The Son of Man was a title he often used to refer to himself. He was saying, "As the angels went up and down on Jacob's stairway, so now they go up and down on me. I am the stairway that joins earth to heaven". He took the things of the earth and lifted them up to God where they were transformed and made new. He brought down the life of heaven to earth, so that the life of

heaven left its trace upon the earth. When he spoke, people said, "These are the words of God spoken to us straight from heaven". When he acted, people saw in what he did the life of heaven coming alive on earth.

Then, after he had died and risen again, Jesus said "Remember I am with you always, to the end of the age". The promise is that the presence of Jesus is with you and through him you may have access to the life of heaven. You may know that here and now. You may know that always and everywhere. When your heart feels dark because of fear, guilt or loneliness, then you have someone to whom to turn because the presence of Jesus is with you. When your heart feels full of light because you have something to celebrate, something for which to say "Thank you", then you have someone to whom to turn, because the presence of Jesus is with you.

Jacob at last leaves this deserted, desolate place. Eventually he arrives at his destination where his mother's family live. He goes to the well where he meets and falls blazingly in love with Rachel. But that's another story.

God bless you,

Tony