

Dear Friends,

GENESIS 32: 22-24

Jacob has been wrestling all his life. Even when he was in the womb, he was struggling with this twin brother Esau. That bout continued when they were born. It went on relentlessly until Jacob had so enraged his brother that Esau made plans to murder him. Jacob had to run. The wrestling continued in Jacob's new home. Laban was his next opponent. Laban became his father-in-law. Jacob married both of his daughters Leah and Rachel. He had children with them and also with their maids.

And now the time has come for Jacob to go home, back to Canaan. He left there with just his staff, a stick which was his only companion. He goes back with a large family and with flocks, herds and camels. He's done well for himself. But ahead lie his greatest challenges. There's his brother. What's happened to Esau's in the time that has passed? Has his anger cooled down? Or has his desire for revenge just grown with the years and become white hot? As Jacob gets nearer to Esau, he feels dread about what may lie ahead. He turns to God. He prays. Years ago, he dreamt of a stairway to heaven and of God saying to him "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go". Now Jacob asks God for help and reminds God of the promise that was made. He says, "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. Yet you have said "I will surely do you good"".

Jacob comes to the Jabbok, a stream off the river Jordan. Jabbok is spelt with the same Hebrew letters as Jacob. The word Jabbok sounds like the Hebrew word for wrestle. We are being given clues. What is about to happen, here in this place, is going to be a key moment in Jacob's life. Jacob sends his precious family ahead. They go across the stream along with all that he owns. He is left alone. He is in the dark again.

And out of the darkness someone emerges. Jacob wrestles with this someone. The story teller describes him as a man. But it also seems possible that he's some kind of supernatural being. He seems to need to get away before the sun rises, like a being who is only able to be out at night. He refuses to give his name as though he's no mere human whose name can be shared with the likes of Jacob. Whoever it is describes Jacob as someone who has wrestled with God. That could be a reference to what is taking place here, so it could be God with whom Jacob is wrestling. Or it could be a reference to how Jacob's whole life has been a wrestling match with God. Jacob is clear in his own mind who it is that he has encountered. He says, "I have seen God face to face".

While the specific identity of Jacob's opponent is left unclear, the story has become a popular picture of what life with God is often like. Life with God is not always comforting and uplifting. Sometimes you may feel as though you are wrestling with God. Sometimes God may feel like an adversary. God has told Jacob to return to

Canaan, but now seems to be standing in his way. If we need the reminder then this reminds us that life with God is not cosy.

How will Jacob survive this, his ultimate wrestling match? And if he survives, will he and his family survive the reunion with Esau?

God bless you,

Tony