

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Paul Weary. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Call to worship (Psalm 121:1-4)

Welcome to worship from the Enfield Circuit. In our worship today we read the strange story of Jacob in a wrestling match with a mysterious stranger. Jacob refuses to give up. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And in our gospel Jesus gives his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. Persistent prayer, persistent hope, persistent faith – that's surely what we need today!

We begin our worship as we read from Psalm 121:
I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Psalm 121:1-4

Hymn StF 451 Open the eyes of my heart, Lord

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jfz5CSBGyqU>

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,
Open the eyes of my heart.
I want to see you, I want to see you.
(Repeat)

To see you high and lifted up,
shining in the light of your glory.
pour out your power and love,
as we sing holy, holy, holy.

Holy, holy, holy,
Holy, holy, holy,
Holy holy holy,
I want to see you.

Paul Baloche.

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Prayer of invocation

Lord, show us your face.
Lord, reveal yourself to us.
Lord, show us more of who you are.

We are afraid to see you,
yet we long to see you.
We are in awe of your holiness,
but confident in your love.
We know that all you do and are is good.
We want to meet you in a life-changing encounter.
We are scared of what you might do.
We fear that you might do nothing.
We come with our fears and doubts,
but with our hearts inclined towards you
and ask that you will graciously meet us now.

Lord, show us your face.
Lord, reveal yourself to us.
Lord, show us more of who you are.
Amen.

Reading

Genesis 32:22-31 (New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised)

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Hymn StF 636 O love that will not let me go

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biHQVoAUTtU>

O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

O cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.

George Matheson (1842-1906)

Reading

Luke 18:1-8 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord

said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

Sermon

'Wrestling Jacob'

There's no doubt that for many people in this country, life right now is a struggle. The rising cost of food and fuel, the poor state of the British economy, the news that Covid-19 rates are rising once again means that many of us are facing the prospects of a difficult winter.

Within the church too, while we have much to celebrate, we certainly have our concerns and anxieties. So much property and finance business that needs sorting out, fewer people to do more jobs. Many of us are feeling tired. And is it my imagination - or is everyone starting to get a cough? It's a sure sign autumn has arrived, and winter is just around the corner.

If that's how you're feeling this morning, our scripture readings have something to say to us. They speak of faithfulness and endurance in the face of difficulty.

In the gospel parable a poor widow successfully uses pester power to persuade an unjust judge to take up her case. Although the parable seems to be about the importance of persistent prayer, it is really about the importance of persistent faith; a message of great importance to Luke's community as they waited for the Kingdom of God to come in all its fullness. "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" says Jesus. "Will he keep putting them off?" Therefore, we should pray and never give up.

Arguably the real struggle we face in life is not with other people or situations external to us. The real struggle is within us – our fears, our concerns, our limited vision, our lack of faith. It is these things we must overcome if we are to move forward as a church. And this is the subject of our Old Testament story, that strange and mysterious account of Jacob's wrestling match by the Jabbok river.

Let's fill in some of the background to the story.

For years Jacob had laboured in the household of his father in law, Laban. He had gained two wives Leah and Rachel and two concubines Bilhah and Zilpah, who between them bore thirteen children. He had amassed flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle and had hired numerous servants to care for

them. By the standards of the day, he was a successful man. Now the time had come for Jacob to return home to Canaan.

As we meet him in Genesis chapter 32, we discover Jacob on his long journey south, making preparations to meet his twin brother, Esau. It's been twenty long years since Jacob left home and the circumstances of his leaving no doubt weighed heavily on his mind. In fact, as he remembered the deceit, the manipulation, the way in which he had cheated Esau out of his heritage, he wasn't at all sure what the reception would be. So, he sent messengers on ahead, to contact Esau and test the water. They returned with news: "We went to your brother Esau; he's coming to meet you. Oh, by the way, he's got four 400 men with him."

Now you don't need 400 men for a friendly family reunion. Jacob is frightened. In great distress he formulates a plan to avert the disaster he fears lies ahead.

So, he goes over to his herds and flocks and personally selects goats, sheep, camels, cows and donkeys to send ahead of him as a gift to Esau. 550 animals in total!

That's plan A. But if plan A doesn't work, Jacob has a plan B. He divides his family, his servants and his flocks into two groups, and he reckons that if Esau comes and attacks one, then at least some will survive.

And then to make doubly sure and leaving nothing to chance, Jacob does what people often do in times of fearfulness and anxiety and distress. He prays.

So Jacob's done everything he can do: plan A, plan B and a prayer for good measure. By now it's late in the day and there is one last thing to do: to send his family and possessions across the Jabbok river to the safety of the other side. Now Jacob is left all alone on the bank of the river. And while he is alone, in the middle of the night, a strange thing happens; a mysterious stranger approaches and wrestles with him till break of day. Quite who this stranger is, is left open-ended: a man? An angel? Or perhaps even God himself?

For as the long, hard night of struggle goes on, Jacob comes to realise that the person he is really wrestling with is God. And yet his opponent cannot overpower him, instead touching Jacob's hip so that his hip is wrenched. "Let me go", says the stranger, "for it is daybreak." But Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

What was it that Jacob wanted more than anything else in life? Blessing. He's been seeking it all his life. But the way in which he has sought to get blessing has led only to brokenness. He tried to get his father's blessing by cheating and by guile and it has only turned to ashes, and with him fleeing for his life, and

with a broken family, and now, with the fearful prospect of war with Esau.

And so, Jacob wrestles and he struggles with God, and the fact that it takes place at night is surely significant.

How many times, in the dark places, has the night seemed so long as we waited for tomorrow, when we didn't know what tomorrow would bring? You know what I'm talking about: those times when we lie awake with worry or anxiety – for ourselves or for someone we love. All manner of situations can bring us to this state: health worries, employment (or the lack of it), money problems, bereavement. Sometimes it is even difficult to pray. At that moment the night can seem endlessly, endlessly long.

So, it's night, and Jacob is alone. In the silence and the aloneness, Jacob comes face to face with his fears and face to face with God. And he says to the one with whom he wrestles, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

And then comes a moment of truth. The man says to him, "What is your name?" A simple question. Easy to answer, you might think, but remember that Jacob has lied about his name in order to get ahead. Jacob has pretended to be something that he's not. Years before when his almost-blind father, Isaac,

had asked, "What is your name? Who are you?" Jacob had lied to get the blessing, He had said, "I am Esau." He had pretended to be what he was not. This time, it is the mysterious stranger who says, "What is your name?" And Jacob answers, "Jacob." That's who I am. The time comes when we must stand before God and recognise the truth about our self.

But at this moment Jacob is Jacob no more. The stranger said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel" and in the new name, Jacob is reminded that, even with his weaknesses, even with his failures, even with his sorry track record, God works with imperfect people. God works with Jacobs, and he turns them into Israels. Israel in the Hebrew language means, "The one who has striven with God."

Then Jacob says to the man, "Please, tell me your name."

But the man replies, "Why do you ask my name?" As if to say, you know who you've been wrestling with. You've not really been wrestling with your brother; you've been wrestling with me, and my good purpose for your life. And Jacob at last received the blessing he had been waiting for. In the light of the morning Jacob called the place Peniel, which means 'face of God', "because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

There was one other thing that changed. Jacob received the affirmation and the blessing of God but he was wounded in the wrestling. So Jacob moves on to the next stage of his life as one who has struggled with God and bears the mark of that struggle; as he takes his new name and new hope into the future; as he discovers that God has prepared the way for him and that Esau is waiting to meet him with peace, and with forgiveness, and with the possibility of a new beginning.

For generations this strange story has fascinated Jewish and Christian commentators and has been interpreted as symbolic of the believer's spiritual struggle with God. For the American journalist and political commentator Bill Moyers this story came alive as he reflected on the experience of suffering and recovering from a serious heart attack:

"I know that struggle, because in my dark night I found myself wrestling and wondering, 'Is God's purpose for me good? Can I trust God? Can I count on God for whatever the future holds?' And I found myself crying out, and in the days that followed I knew that deep inside of my being in that encounter with God in the darkness and in the aloneness, something had changed in me. And I had found new strength and new hope and new comfort, but something else had changed. In my woundedness, I realized that all my life I'd been wounding other people. I'd been competitive, I'd wanted to succeed, and

so in doing that, in seeking that success I'd wounded my wife, my colleagues, my children. In my own night of struggle and wounding I discovered that I did not want to wound anymore..."

This story of Jacob wrestling was one of Charles Wesley's favourite texts. Time and time again he preached from it. And it inspired him to write one of his most dramatic hymns, "Come, O thou traveller unknown". It's not a hymn we sing very often, perhaps because it is twelve verses long!

Wesley retells the story of Jacob through the filter of his own spiritual experience. At the beginning of the hymn the name of the mysterious traveller is unknown.

But it does not remain unknown. And here Wesley diverges from Jacob and the biblical story. For the new name of God has been revealed to Christian believers, and the name of God is love.

So Wesley sings:

'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me,
I hear thy whisper in my heart;
the morning breaks, the shadows flee:
pure, universal Love thou art;
to me, to all thy mercies move;

thy nature and thy name is Love.

This is Jacob's message to us. This is God's encouragement to us in these difficult times as a church and as a nation. We are people who have faced our own struggles in life; whether it's physical illness or broken relationships or problems in church or tough circumstances in a hurting and suffering world. As we wrestle and as we struggle with our doubts and our fears, we discover that God is love and God is for us, and that God gives us his blessing - the blessing of his own self and the promise of a future.

Prayers of Intercession

God of life and love without limit,
we pray for those
who long to see the world a better place,
but have grown cynical,
and feel defeated.

We remember:

those who campaign for justice and human rights;
those who work with the victims of disaster or war;
those who enter politics in answer to your call;

and we ask you:

help us to keep on praying: and never give up.

God of life and love without limit,
we pray for those
who long for a better quality of life
but whose hopes have been so often dashed
that they despair.

We remember:

those with long-term illnesses;
those existing in poverty;
those unable to make loving relationships;

and we ask you:

help us to keep on praying: and never give up.

God of life and love without limit,
we pray for those
who long to share the good news of Jesus Christ
but have met with little response,
and feel discouraged.

We remember:

the missionary work of our churches;
our nurture and teaching of the young;
our individual witness and service;

and we ask you:

help us to keep on praying and never give up.

God of life and love without limit,
we pray with your struggling, suffering people around the
world

who are praying in tears and anger.

In strength and endurance we are wrestling
as Jacob wrestled with the angel
and was touched and was marked and became a blessing.

Through Jesus Christ

you have let us know where you want us to be -
help us to be there now.

Be with us, touch us, mark us,

let us be a blessing;

let your power be present in our weakness.

Help us to keep on praying and never give up.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever.

Amen.

Hymn StF 461 Come, O thou traveller unknown

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfVUGob7Uvw>

This version, by British folk singer Maddy Prior and the Carnival band, is a selection of 5 verses (there are 12 verses in StF) and is sung to the American tune Vernon.

Come, O thou traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell Thee who I am,
My misery and sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name,
Look on Thy hands, and read it there;
But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?
Tell me Thy name, and tell me now.

In vain Thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold!

Art Thou the man that died for me?
The secret of Thy love unfold;
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.

'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear Thy whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
Pure, universal love Thou art;
To me, to all, Thy bowels move;
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

The Sun of righteousness on me
Hath rose with healing in His wings,
Withered my nature's strength; from Thee
My soul its life and succour brings;
My help is all laid up above;
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Blessing

The blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

'The Lord will keep you from all evil;
The Lord will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.' Psalm 121.7–8
Thanks be to God! **Amen.**

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