

# New Kilpatrick

## Sermon

24th September 2017

Genesis 28:10-17

***Spirit... may we not linger here... in the echo of your presence... but follow it... in word... in action... in imagination and creativity... from this place... to every place we find ourselves... that what we meet here... and find here... and discover here... is our map into the world again...***

I know most people sitting here today will have sophisticated and cultured TV tastes... We list Poldark... and Planet Earth... among our favourite TV shows... Downton Abbey and Strictly Come Dancing... But is it just my household that secretly watches... Say yes to the dress... the Sheriffs are coming... and 999 What's your emergency... fascinated as we are by the reality of humanity...

The programme 'Ambulance' which is a behind the scenes fly-on-the-wall documentary of 999 handlers... (Can I just say... obviously I don't watch such programmes... I've just heard about it)... but there was one case where a father phoned the police because his son wouldn't go to bed... or another phoned 999 to complain that her takeaway order was wrong... and another at 4.30 in the morning to check the score of a Middlesbrough football game...

I don't doubt that in some way... the person making the call... felt anxious or frustrated enough to justify such a call... but clearly that an obvious abuse... especially when you realise how absolutely incredible it is to have such a service... when you balance that with how needy others are in the Caribbean or Myanmar... Such examples shame us...

But perhaps in the same way... I wonder if the Almighty could make the same kind of programme... out of the prayers we all make... Perhaps you can imagine God sitting with Gabriel and the others... and God saying... "Wait till you hear this prayer I got today"... and we could all fill in the blanks... hoping the traffic lights would change to green... finding a parking space... or the rain to stop... pass exams... find something we've lost...

None of us are exempt... When I first started training as a minister... and was given a list of visits... nearly every time I rang the doorbell... I made a prayer... "Please God... don't

let them be in”... but they usually were... so what is it we think we are doing when we pray...

Let me say now... that this sermon is a personal view of prayer... because we all have our own experiences of it... and I have to say I am quite jealous of those who find prayer quite easy... who have confidence in their prayer life... who aren't scared of prayer and have a habit... or the faith... to see prayer answered...

My own experience... sits less comfortably with that... but lets begin with a story... already told today... Jacob... he is between places when we meet him... He's a refugee... quite genuinely... an alien... because he is running from home where it isn't safe... His brother will have nothing to do with him... because Jacob the trickster... has gone too far... and to remain in his homeland... would mean he would be killed...

So he is on the run... crossing borders... to go and stay with Uncle Laban... where... he doesn't know it yet... he will be served with the same trick he used on his brother... and having worked for seven years for Rachel... is tricked into marrying Leah... and thus tricked into working for another seven years... But all of that is yet to come...

Jacob is caught up in the middle of these two events... can't go home... and is wandering into the unknown... it is a moment of crisis... and one night... with a stone for a pillow... he has a vivid dream... of a stairway to heaven... on which the angels are ascending and descending... and where God stands at the top...

So vivid is the dream... when he wakes he marks this place as a thin place... a gateway to heaven... It is an intense experience for Jacob... an encounter between himself and God... an encounter that is prayer... which is the simplest explanation of it all... He has been conscious of God... of an encounter with the divine... enough for him to say in the morning...“God is truly in this place”...

But the thing is... who is changed by this encounter?... When we pray... there is a lot of asking for things to change... for God to change something... to do something... and so my question has always been... does prayer change God... or what Love does in the world?... Surely God does not change... which is a fundamental of our faith... We are called to do God's will... rather than ask God to do ours...

When Jacob prays here... in this moment of crisis... God isn't changed... Jacob is...

You see... the Hebrew verb 'to pray'... is an interesting word... but the Hebrew verb 'to pray'... is reflexive... and that means it implies... an action... done to oneself...

Don't think I worked all that out by myself... I just have sources I trust... I'm still at the level of remembering a verb is a doing word... but in Hebrew... the verb 'to pray'... literally means... 'to judge oneself'... as Jonathan Sacks reveals...

It means... stepping out of the closed room of self... and witness the life of the world... as well as ourselves... from beyond the walls of our egotism... Prayer understood like this... is where the constant 'me, me, me'... is silenced... and for a sacred moment... we realise... we're not the centre of things... There is a universe God is interested in... beyond the 999 calls...

And that is Jacob's critical moment of transformation... He's changed because no longer is this story about him... and what he can get... a birthright... a blessing... a patriarch's position... This whole thing... is bigger than him... And it took this moment of crisis to realise and get that...

Jonathan Sacks on his commentary on this passage says... "If we could only stop asking the question 'How does this affect me?' we would see we are surrounded by miracles"...

For Jacob it has taken a crisis... to make him realise how self centred he has been... and perhaps the same happens to us not just individually but nationally too... with Grenfell Tower... or Hurricane Maria... or Irma... and an earthquake in Mexico... and ethnic cleaning in Myanmar...

The whole of our prayer life flips round... when instead of asking "what do I need?"... it becomes "what can I give?"... To me... that is the only question that gives meaning to what happens in the troubles of the world... because prayer more than anything is about listening for others rather than speaking for self...

And thus... in the silence of listening... is the truth... that we are here because The One... wanted us to be... The one who gifted us... has given us purpose... and we are set a task only we can do...

Prayer... is the change that is made in us... that enables us to see in the world in terms of neighbour... and what needs to be changed...

We are transformed... renewed... as Jacob was... and in the best of times... we find our own Bethels... 'God is in this place'... because God is the love that moves us away from self... towards the other...

When we silence the 'I' of self... we make space for the 'thou' of God...

## **References**

Jonathan Sacks Covenant & Conversation: Genesis  
Esther M Menn Commentary on Genesis 28:10-19a