

Jacob Jesus and Conflict(Gen. 32.22-31,)

Let me take you back to your schooldays when you were studying Shakespeare. The play of which I want to remind you is Romeo and Juliet, the story of the two young lovers kept apart by their warring relatives and their names. Romeo is a Montague and Juliet is a Capulet and these two names spell disaster to each other. Juliet says to Romeo, ‘Deny thy father and refuse your name; or if thou wilt not....I’ll no longer be a Capulet.’ She continues; ‘O, be some other name; What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’ Juliet implies that names are irrelevant, it’s what you are that counts, and, indeed, most of us would agree with her. But this morning I want to present to you some scenes in which names are very important.

The first concerns Jacob, of whom we heard in the first reading, but before I start talking about Jacob, let me enter into the realms of farce with Jacob’s elder twin brother, Esau. Most of us only know two things about

Esau. The first is the tongue twister: ‘ I saw Esau sitting on a see-saw, Esau he saw me.’ And the second is the glorious mock sermon in “Beyond the Fringe”. It starts pontifically with the opening ‘ My text is “Esau was an hairy man”’ - repeat, and ends with the memorable sentiment that ‘I always think that life is like a sardine tin - there’s always a little bit in the corner that you can’t quite reach.’ It is a lesson to every preacher.

But more seriously, let’s trace the story of Esau (the hairy man) and his brother, Jacob. They are the two sons of Isaac and Rebecca, the grandsons of Abraham - Abraham, you will remember, who had his name changed from Abram, meaning ‘reverend father’ to Abraham ‘Father of a multitude’. You didn’t need a deed poll to change your name in those days, God did it for you. What’s in a name?

Now Isaac is getting very old and blind, but Esau is his favourite son, while Rebecca loves Jacob - a divided family - life doesn’t change that much in three thousand

years. One day, Esau, who is a hunter and a man of the bush, returns home hot and hungry. The only food was the casserole that Jacob, the stay at home, was cooking. You can imagine the smell, meat, herbs, lentils, gravy. For the hungry Esau it was too much. Jacob takes advantage of the fierce hunger of Esau and bargains with him that he will only let Esau eat if he gives him his birthright. Esau foolishly agrees. Pretty despicable of Jacob to take advantage of Esau's hunger to make him sell his birthright for 'a mess of potage'. I should tell you at this stage that Jacob's name, although originally meaning 'grasping the heel' as he did this at his birth, grasping the heel of the first born twin Esau, it also means 'deceiver' or 'supplanter'. What's in a name?

The next scene shows Jacob in an even worse light. Spurred on by his mother, he masquerades as his elder brother, Esau, his father's favourite. He brings beautifully cooked kid to his blind father, Isaac, and puts the skin of the kid on his hands and arms so that when Isaac feels him, he will think it is Esau, the hairy man,

who is being so kind. Poor old blind Isaac blesses Jacob. Once more, Jacob, the ‘supplanter’, has cheated his brother.

This time, Esau doesn’t take the deception gladly and plans his vengeance when Isaac, his father, dies. Rebecca gets wind of this and sends her favourite son way out of Esau’s reach to her brother, Laban’s, country. By this time most of us would be thinking that Jacob is an out and out villain. But, as the Bible says, God declared ‘Jacob I have loved.’ However great the sin, God will forgive.

And to prove this, Jacob on the way to his uncle’s land has the marvellous dream of the ladder reaching up to heaven, the gates of heaven open and the angels ascending and descending. He has discovered that God is merciful and forgiving, and so is ready to go on and fulfil his destiny. I suspect that many of us have had an experience that tells us that God is near. We can then say with Jacob ‘ This is the gate of heaven; this is the house of God.’

Well, Jacob works for Laban, Rebecca's brother, who is a cruel tyrant, he marries both Rachel and her sister Leah and sets off to return home with his wives, children, flocks and herds. He is now a rich and powerful man, but not surprisingly, he is deeply worried about how his brother, Esau, will greet him. Jacob sends in advance messengers with gifts, who return saying that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob is even more anxious. He splits up his flocks so that not all will be lost, sends on his wives and children, and remains alone by the Jabbok stream - the Blue River - and has this extraordinary encounter that we heard this morning.

The text for this is one of the oldest bits of the Bible, dating back nearly three thousand years. Its origins lie in the ancient beliefs in river spirits guarding fords which are found in so many cults. In all these myths the demon spirit cannot stand the light of day and is defeated if the victim learns his name. But the ancient story has evolved into this strange, mysterious struggle. Jacob struggles -

with whom? A demon, an angel. God? We don't know, but the climax is that the angel (let us say) blesses him and gives him a new name. Not Montague to Capulet, or Capulet to Montague, but Jacob to Israel. What's in a name? Jacob, the heel-catcher, the deceiver is renamed Israel - he who wrestles with God (there is a nice Hebrew pun here; sarah means wrestle) or has power with God.

Jacob or Israel is now a new man. Jesus said that must happen to all of us; 'Unless you are born anew, you cannot see the kingdom of God'. Jn 3.3. Jacob struggled and wrestled in the dark hours of the night and was born anew. We all struggle in our dark hours with a demon or an angel or with God, sometimes even with ourselves. But we also can be born anew. Hold on to God as Jacob did with his angel, and in that dark hour say to your angel, as did Jacob, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'

All now comes good for the newly named Israel. He is reconciled with Esau, he has twelve sons who become

the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now I want briefly to turn to another name. Did you realise that Jesus's real name in his own language was Joshua? Jesus is the Latinised Greek translation. What's in a name? Well, Joshua in Hebrew means 'God saves', an appropriate name for our saviour Christ. Joshua was the Hebrew hero who led the tribes of Israel into the land flowing with milk and honey. Jesus leads us into the new land where we can be born anew.

But we don't just march easily into our new land. Jacob didn't, Joshua didn't; and Jesus, the new Joshua, found it hard at times to convince the people of his mission. In the gospel this morning he has just heard of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod and retires to a quiet place to contemplate this tragedy, leading him eventually to feed the flock of people who follow him.

As Jesus sees the actions of a psychotic king, so we contemplate the tragedies of the Ukraine and Gaza. Do

not for one moment blame God for these. They are purely and simply the result of the actions of human beings. To us, wicked and tragic, but to those involved justifiable and essential. In Ukraine those who shot down the plane call themselves ‘patriots’ We call them rebels and terrorists. What’s in a name? In Gaza there is the same confusion of identity. To Israel Hamas rockets are the weapons of terrorists, to Palestinians the response of Israel in shelling hospitals and shelters amount to a war crime. What’s in a name? The land into which Joshua led the tribes of Israel flowing with milk and honey is no longer flowing with these treasures but a land in which terror and despair prevail.

Yes, of course we can take sides, and I indeed do. I personally think the Israeli response is a gross over-reaction and the separatists in Ukraine are basically terrorists. When Jesus heard of the beheading of John his reaction was to feed the people. Sadly the modern day reaction to such news is to seek revenge.

Now it is easy to say that we can do nothing about this. It's none of our business. But it is our business and I suggest that there are two things we can do. First, let people know our feelings; that we are horrified by the news from Ukraine and Gaza. Secondly, we can pray - not for God to stop it all which is not for God to do. It is our business. We can pray for the leaders of the various factions to follow the ways of peace

Jacob had the courage and persistence to work through his dark years of exile, the persistence to return home to face Esau, the persistence to wrestle with the angel. His name was changed to 'power with God'. Joshua had the persistence to lead the tribes of Israel into Canaan. A thousand years later another Joshua was born of Mary. "You will bear a son and you will call his name Jesus." (Lk 1.31) and that Jesus preached a gospel of love and forgiveness. That is what we have to try to comprehend.

**What's in a name? Jacob, the supplanter or deceiver;
Israel, the wrestler or power with God,; Joshua or Jesus,
God saves; Jesus our Saviour**

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