

**Dorset South and West Circuit
Service for 2 August 2020 by Revd Gwyneth Owen**

Please centre yourself in God's presence in whatever way works best for you – a lit candle, a time of silence or, maybe, breathing in “be” and out “still”.

When you're ready, I invite you to say the following service out loud and slowly, letting the words sink deep into your being. Don't rush from one section to the other – take time

Hymn

The kingdom of God is justice and joy for Jesus restores what sin would destroy:
God's power and glory in Jesus we know, and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace: The prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed, God's banquet to share, and hope is awakened in place of despair.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice; believe the good news; repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal, in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call, and all things cry, “Glory!” to God all in all.

Bryan Rees (1911-1983) CCLI 879917

Prayer

Gracious God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God of justice and joy, mercy and grace,
challenge and choice, gift and journey we worship you. In your presence we pause and
allow your Being to share our space, invite your Presence into our thinking and praying.
PAUSE.

We praise you for loving us and wanting to be in conversation with us – wanting to be in a
relationship with us. We confess we don't always understand how this can be or why this
can be and we're tempted to give up at times. Forgive us, and liberate us from trying to be
too rational about you. Give us curious, exploring, trusting and open minds that allow our
whole selves to lean into your Being and Presence and allow you to move towards us in
the mystery of your love and welcome, your forgiveness and grace.

We praise you for Jesus Christ. His life is our pattern. His life is our hope for deepening our
relationship with you. His word of forgiveness is our peace that lightens the burdens of
guilt and disappointment that so easily beset us.

We praise you for your Holy Spirit who brings our conversation with you to life and who
reminds us that you are the one who takes the initiative in our relationship with you. You
are the one always looking for us, always searching us out.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit we worship you in the name of Christ. Amen.

Genesis 32:22-31

Background. Jacob has been on the run from his brother, Esau, for 20 years or so. He has acquired wives (and others) plus 11 children but has not had an easy ride thanks to the duplicity of his brother-in-law for whom he worked all these years. Now, he's going

home and he doesn't know what kind of welcome he's going to get from Esau. Will he still be angry with Jacob for stealing his birthright? Will he try to kill Jacob? All of these uncertainties are swirling around Jacob's mind as we pick up the story below. Oh yes, in the storywriter's mind, the "man" with whom Jacob's wrestles is God!

²² The same night he (Jacob) got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ 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." ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Reflection

I don't really watch much TV but I love late night chat programmes like Newsnight, Question Time, the podcast Newscast or its forerunner, Brexitcast.

These programmes are all about people in conversation in one way or another. People agreeing with each other, vehemently disagreeing and many shades in-between. We thrive on conversation because we can express our ideas and hear the ideas of others. Conversation is one way by which we grow, develop and are stretched. Conversation can fuel our imaginations and sow seeds that take a lifetime to grow. Conversation may save us from being too parochial by exposing us to the bigger, more complex and nuanced picture than we are able to hold by ourselves.

From the very start, the Biblical narrative marks the importance of conversation. More precisely, it marks God's conversation with people – we may call it today a Godcast!. So, Adam finds himself being asked awkward questions by God in the Garden of Eden story, as does Cain after he murdered his brother. Adam and Cain come out of those conversations having to handle the consequences of their actions – Adam kicked out of the Garden and Cain made a fugitive wanderer. God's conversation with Abraham and Sarah via 3 visitors in Genesis 18 ends up with Sarah being pregnant! In today's reading, God's conversation with Jacob at Peniel results in Jacob limping away from the battle.

You see, the writers of the Hebrew scriptures were not afraid to write about how people's encounters or conversations with God actually shaped them, formed them, changed them – not just in their thinking but in their whole lives – where they went, who they went with, how they struggled and so on.

In the passage you have just read, the Bible writers tell of a bruising encounter Jacob had with God – called "a man" in the account. What's this wrestling match all about? Well, maybe Jacob is facing himself and his past actions in the presence of God – and it doesn't make comfortable viewing. Jacob is troubled – thrashing about in his mind and body, his emotions and memories, and all of this takes place on a stage where he is clinging onto God for dear life. Eventually, as dawn breaks, the conversation is heard as God tells Jacob, "Let me go" (at the time people believed no one could look at God and live, so daylight was a threat to Jacob in the mind of the story writer). Then comes the crux of the conversation from a man whose name (Jacob) means someone who has

acted in an underhand way. He actually gets honest in his conversation with God and says, "I will not let you go until you bless me".

Ah, there's a deep need within us to be blessed, isn't there? To know things are in order between us and God. To know that there is a way of finding peace within ourselves so that our relationships with God and others are on the right track. Jacob is not disappointed. God give him a quick name- change to "Israel" (which means, "one who strives with God") and continues, "for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed". Then God blessed Jacob and Jacob limped away as dawn broke his hip having been injured in the fight.

A question for all of us this, "To what extent do we have honest conversations with God – I mean, no holds barred kind of conversations? Take a while to ponder the question and work out what it might mean for you.

The gospel reading set for today is the Feeding of the 5,000 in Matthew 14:13-21. Please read it if your Bible is to hand. The point I want to make from this well known incident is that, for the gospel writers, God continues his conversation with people through the life of Jesus Christ whom the writer of John's gospel called, the Word – the spoken one. The conversationalist.

Notice in this passage that the people are hungry and the disciples want to send them away. Jesus, however, has a conversation with them – "You feed them" he says. They complain, "But we've only got 5 loaves and 2 fish". You know what happens next: in Jesus' hands the 5 loaves and 2 fish are sufficient and the people are fed and with plenty to spare. Why did Jesus do this? Look at verse 14 – he had compassion on the crowd. Compassion. God's conversation with us is driven by compassion, and that word means "suffering with". God suffers with us and comes to us in our whole bodies and not just in our minds. We are holistic people!

So, Jacob staggers from his encounter with God blessed but limping. The 5,000 go home joyfully from their encounter with Jesus, having been well fed.

Sometimes we allow our faith to be stuck in our heads, our thinking, and our reasoning. It gets separated from our whole selves with our multiplicity of needs, and emotions. These passages remind us that conversation with God involves our whole selves, and there is healing and food for the journey at the deepest levels of our lives.

I began with podcasts and chat programmes that I enjoy and said that conversation stretches us and widens our horizons. Ours is a faith built on the belief that God is in conversation with us in profound ways that affect our whole selves and not just our thinking. Whether you need to know God's blessing and it's a struggle, or you need to be fed by the God of compassion, take courage for there is enough for all your needs in Christ. Amen

Now, hold a time of silence in God's presence. What conversation do you want to have with God?

Prayers of Intercession

God of conversations,

We pray for people we know for whom life is a struggle: mentally, physically, emotionally

May your blessing be known in their lives

We pray for prison and probation staff, for workers supporting those with drug, alcohol and other dependencies and for mental health staff

May your blessing be known in their lives

We pray for the millions who are hungry for food around the world

Help governments to make policies that will feed them and help me work out what I can do to help

We pray for those who have no home and for those who live in fear in their homes

Help governments to make policies that will house and protect them and help me work out what I can do to help

We pray for the church we usually attend – its witness, its congregation, the people who use the premises

May your blessing be on church leaders as they make decisions about how and when churches might re-open safely

We pray for ourselves. Help us to have conversations with you that impact the whole of our lives. May we know the blessing so longed-for by Jacob and receive food for our journey as did the 5,000. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn

Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not to rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind; Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need in Thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, Thy love unknown hath broken every barrier down;
Now, to be Thine, yea, Thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, of that free love the breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
Here for a season, then above, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

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May God's blessing of Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you always. Amen