

Besting Deus Homo

Genesis 32:22-31

Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to be one of the most recognizable people in the world. Even 30 years after her death perhaps she still is? Mother Teresa was synonymous with dedication, service, sacrifice, compassion . . . but, most of all . . . faith. This truly was a woman of faith . . . a woman whose faith allowed her to give up everything to serve the poorest of the poor. Yes, most of all Mother Teresa was admired as a woman of faith. And, rightly so!

But, soon after her death many of Mother Teresa's personal letters were published which showed her struggle of faith . . . her struggle to hear God's voice . . . her struggle to feel God's presence . . . her doubts! And, this wasn't a temporary situation but something she lived with for over 50 years!

I remember it caused a sensation at the time. There were newspaper headlines like 'Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith' and 'Does God really exist? The agony of Teresa'

People were shocked . . . dismayed . . . scandalized! As if Mother Teresa's faith should have been more than human . . . superhuman! People were scandalized, but they shouldn't have been. Not if they had read their Bible! There are very few cardboard cutout characters in the Bible. Even fewer TikTok influencer types with their spray tans and Jesus-Loves-You Colgate smiles. No, the people of faith in the Bible stories are always flawed and often complex and very definitely human.

Like Jacob! He's a perfect example. Not the type of bloke who would be first choice for your church council team. Jacob's a smooth-talking con-man. A swindler. He's already managed to steal not only the birth-right but also the first-born blessing from his older brother, Esau. Esau's not too happy about that and he vows to kill Jacob. This does not bode well for family Christmas gatherings! So, Jacob runs away and gets up to some more dodgy deals that make him rich. Then God tells him it's time for him to return home and face the music. It's time to sort things out with Esau. On his way home he hears that Esau is coming to meet him . . . with four hundred men! Sounds ominous. That's what Jacob thinks. So, he sends ahead of him some of his flocks . . . as gifts for Esau . . . well, bribes really. Jacob does everything he can to avoid the consequences of his previous actions. He even sends ahead of himself his wives and children . . . anything to keep as much distance between him and his brother for as long as possible! Are you beginning to warm to Jacob as a person?

Finally, Jacob is alone . . . or so he thinks . . . and (finally) Jacob is confronted by God. And, this is where the story gets interesting! Perhaps it's about time God stepped into the picture. Jacob's weaseled his way out of facing the consequences for too long. He's lied and cheated his way through life and he's still doing it. So, finally, God will sort him out . . . finally Jacob's going to get the comeuppance he deserves! Now, Jacob has met his match!

Except, that's not what happens, is it? The man wrestles with Jacob the whole night and doesn't overpower him! Now, if this is God Jacob is wrestling with, this should have been the fastest and most comprehensive victory of God's wrestling career! If there ever was a mis-match surely this is it?! But God

doesn't overpower Jacob! What kind of God is this? Afterall, if we had God's power that's what we would have done, isn't it? Put Jacob in his place. Teach him a lesson. Show him who's boss! That's what Jacob was expecting *Esau* to do. It's how we operate. But it seems, that's not how God operates . . . at least not in this case.

The easiest thing for God to do would be to use his power to overpower, but he doesn't. It reminds me of being a parent. When you're dealing with toddlers the easiest way . . . sometimes the *only* way . . . is to say "Because I said so!" as you wrangle them into their car seat. But, try doing that with your adult children! Even if you were physically stronger than them I would suggest it's not the best basis for an on-going relationship!

In wrestling with Jacob . . . in not overpowering Jacob, God honours the relationship with Jacob. God chooses the grace of staying in the struggle. And, in the struggle the relationship changes . . . in the struggle the relationship grows.

Jacob is each one of us.

This is a story of a God who doesn't always want to be treating us as toddlers. This is a story that shows the difference between God in theory and God in practice. God in theory is an all-powerful, all knowing, all-seeing God somewhere up there looking down on us. God in practice is a man who wrestles with Jacob. Actually wrestles with him. God in theory is the God we carry around in our head. God in practice is the God we meet in every single encounter with another human being.

This is a story of a God who takes our humanness seriously. That means all our flaws and failings and doubts and fears. All our questions and uncertainties. This is the story of a God who cares enough to engage with us . . . to wrestle with us in order to be in relationship with us . . . not in theory, but in practice . . . in reality. And, in reality God is willing not only to wrestle with Jacob, but to become Jacob! To become one of us.

Finally, and best of all, this is a story of a God who blesses us . . . in the struggle . . . despite our flaws and failings . . . despite our humanness.

God may not have managed to overpower Jacob in their wrestle but Jacob doesn't come away from the struggle unscathed or unchanged. Jacob comes away with a new name . . . and with a limp. Both of those are part of God's blessing. Both of them are signs of God's commitment to the relationship . . . God's commitment to the struggle . . . God's commitment to grace.

We too never come away from an encounter with God unchanged. God's wrestle with us started in our baptism where we received a new name . . . a new life . . . and a limp! Your limp may not be as obvious as Jacob's but you have one . . . a reminder that you are human . . . which is a reminder that God encounters us not in theory, but in practice . . . only in our humanness. And, God blesses us in our humanness by continuing to honour us in the struggle. You see, this is not theory, this is how things are in reality.

Jacob received God's blessing . . . he received a new name . . . but was he changed for the better? Well, in theory . . . yes. But, in practice it's a bit more complicated than that. Jacob remained flawed and failed and human. Yet, God blessed him and through him blessed others.

And, what about us? Are we changed for the better? Well, the theory says that through baptism each day we put off the old self and put on the new. Every day we are born anew. The theory is not wrong, it's just that what we see in practice is often not that, is it? What we see in practice is still our flaws and fears and doubts and failings. What we see is our limp. But, it's there we encounter God . . . not in theory but in practice. In our humanness. And, it's there that God blesses us so we can be a blessing to others . . . as they encounter God through us . . . in *their* humanness.

We are not superhuman . . . we are not super holy . . . we are not super spiritual . . . we are people who have encountered God and live to tell the tale.

In practice.

Amen.

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