

Last week, in the course of our reflections on God working in and through our imperfect humanity, we continued our reflections on the whole issue of grace. In the context of that, I quoted Philip Yanci and his book ‘What is so amazing about grace?’

“There is nothing I can do to make God love us more and there is nothing I can do to make God love us less.”

Let us just keep that in mind as we turn to the Psalm set for today, Psalm 139. I must confess this is one of my favourite Psalms. In it the Psalmist reflects on God’s abiding presence, God’s abiding awareness.

- 1 O Lord, you have searched me | out and | known me; @
you know my sitting down and my rising up;
you dis|cern my | thoughts ~ from a|far.
2. You mark out my journeys | and my | resting place @
and are ac|quainted with | all my | ways.
- 3 For there is not a word | on my | tongue, @
but you, O Lord, | know it | alto|gether.
-
- 6 Where can I go then | from your | spirit? @
Or where can I | flee | from your | presence?
- 7 If I climb up to heaven, | you are | there; @
if I make the grave my bed, | you are | there | also.

This for me underlines a fundamental truth about the God I worship. There is nothing that is hidden from God and therefore there is nothing that I need to try to hide from God. God knows me, knows me better than I know myself. He knows my strengths and my weaknesses, even the things I try to hide from myself. And through it all, as Philip Yanci reminds us, God still loves me and reaches out to me.

As I contemplate this God who loves me, who understands me, who continually searches for me, I realise that the God who is inescapable is a source of strength and well-being.

It is with this picture of this inescapable God that I now turn to our Old Testament Lesson, as we continue to follow the story of Jacob. We find Jacob alone, in the middle of the desert. He was on the run from his brother Esau. With the help of his mother, Jacob deceived his father Isaac, making him think that he was Esau, and had tricked his father into giving him his final blessing. Esau, for his part, on discovering the truth plots vengeance on his brother, that once his father is dead he will exact his revenge.

So Jacob is on the run from Esau. Up to this stage in the story, God has hardly featured in the thoughts of Jacob. So in a very real sense Jacob is on the run from God, on the run from himself – but God finds him that night as he sleeps beneath the desert sky and speaks the word of promise spoken to Abraham and Isaac.

“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

I am the God of your ancestors, I am the God of your descendants.

I am with you, I will watch over you wherever you go.

Jacob discovers something about himself that night. Jacob is standing at the interface between his community's past and present. It was for Jacob a turning point in his life. That turning point becomes a moment of renewal in the history of God's dealings with his people. It is a different, though far from perfect Jacob who moves on from Bethel. But it is in him and through him God will continue to act, in him and through him the promise will be fulfilled.

As I said, Jacob is standing at the interface between his community's past and future. I want to stay with that idea of standing at the interface between past and future and reflect on our own particular vocation as individuals and as a community. And I want to think particularly about the whole issue of values, the values we adopt, the values we instil.

Those of us who have had the privilege of bringing up children are only too painfully aware of the responsibilities we have in influencing the young lives we are entrusted with – and the anguish as they rebel with all the assurance and certainty of youth – perhaps you have heard the expression 'I'm not young enough to know everything.' Parents, teachers, all of us - are the ones who stand at the interface of past and future for these young people. Our influence, for good or ill, can have a huge influence on these young lives.

During the Celtic Tiger years it is often said that we as a society 'lost the run of ourselves' – that prosperity bred a materialism, in the process we lost sight of the values of community, of family. I recall talking to a man in the electronic security business in the wake of the crash and asking him how he was coping.

I will always remember his reply – ‘I’m not as busy, I’m not earning as much – but then I come home at 6 and not 8 or 9 and so I see more of my children and my wife and that can’t be totally bad.’. This is not to forget the awful pain and destruction that the crash inflicted on us as people lost homes, jobs, watched children emigrate but it does say something about the pressures that were placed on family and community life in those heady days.

We’re now starting to emerge from that awful period on our history – the property supplements in the papers are getting bigger as prices once more start to spiral. I’ve seen the stress that that has placed on our own family. At last wages in some sectors are starting to grow. Now is the time for us as a society, as we stand at the interface between our past and our future, to ask what sort of society do we want to see developing as we move into our next period of prosperity. We may have lost the run of ourselves the last time – do we have to do it next time round? Can we not learn some lessons from our past about the value of community, of family, of faith? Last time we went through our times of prosperity and still left huge gaps in our health and community services – those on the margins of our society experienced little of the benefits of the boom and suffered in the bust as services were cut.

We are now approaching the Centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. The Irish Times has been recalling through newspaper items of the time the events following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand that culminated in war. This week, our newspapers have been full of images of the deepening conflict in Gaza, of images of the wreckage of a Malaysian airliner strewn

across the fields of Eastern Ukraine. We are reminded of the precarious nature of peace, of the dangers of local conflict spreading.

It is surely one of those crucial moments, as we stand at the interface between past and future, for the world to take a step back. National and international leaders carry a huge weight of responsibility at this time. This is a time for deep and earnest prayer, prayer for them as individuals, for gifts of wisdom, of insight, that in them and through them God may bring peace.

We leave Jacob, the morning after the night before, aware of God's presence in his life in a way he had never experienced before, standing at the interface between the past and future of God's people.

We reflect on ourselves, as individuals and as a community, as we stand at the interface of our past and future. What values are we instilling in our children as they move towards adult life? What values are we going to adopt as a society, what style of leadership are we going to demand of our politicians, of our business leaders so that as we move into our next period of prosperity we retain our individual and national integrity. We reflect on our broken and hurting world, searching for peace and far from peace and we pray for those who bear the responsibilities of leadership.