

One of the subjects that I enjoyed studying at school was history. The history of any country or society is a combination of an account of a sequence of events and a reflection on the people and events that shaped those events.

Whenever the history of a nation comes to be written, certain individuals stand out as crucial. A history of the first world war will contain not only the dates of decisive battles such as Ypres, the Somme, Paschendale, but also the leaders such as Herbert Asquith, David Lloyd George, Field Marshall Haig, Kaiser Wilhelm, Marshall Petain. We are now in the midst of a Decade of Centenaries of events that shaped the history of Ireland North and South. In the context of this we will be recalling, not celebrating, the Ulster Covenant, the gun runnings into Larne and Howth, the 1916 rising, the establishment of the first Dail in 1919, the Anglo Irish Treaty and Partition and the Civil War – but also the people who shaped these events, Dillon, Pearse, Childers, Casement, Carson, Collins, De Valera, Craig.

In a very real sense these are more than individuals – they embody the communities out of which they arose. In them we see articulated the hopes and fears, the aspirations and hostilities of these same communities. To understand the era the events through which they lived we have to understand them – for each of them emerged from particular communities in particular circumstances.

Over these last few weeks in our Old Testament Lessons we have been following the Genesis accounts of the lives of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These figures stand at the heart of the emergence of the people of Israel. As we follow this story, we read of events that shaped not just

individuals, but shaped a nation and its particular relationship with the God who called Abram out of obscurity to be the father of a nation through whom all nations would be blessed, a promise fulfilled in the coming of Christ. As followers of Christ, this is part of our story, part of our heritage.

One of the characteristics of the biblical history is that it transcends history. The issues that are dealt with speak to each succeeding generation. Take the account we read this morning in Genesis. The events described happened to a particular individual, Jacob, at a particular point in time.

We find Jacob and his family encamped near the ford at Jabbock. In the stillness of the desert night, he is left with his thoughts. We are told that he struggled with a man all night. It is quite clear from the story that his struggle is with God.

A man's struggle with God is never in isolation but is related to who he is and what he is. Jacob is brought face to face with his past. Jacob at the time had been able to justify his behaviour to himself. Esau had not valued his birthright; Laban had deceived him. It has definitely brought him prosperity. But that night in the stillness of the desert it did not bring him peace.

But there is another side to the man who struggled with God and himself that night. For alongside his scheming, Jacob did have a devotion and a loyalty as witnessed by his willingness to serve 14 years for his beloved Rachel and a desire to be right with God. In a very real sense the struggle that night was between a Jacob who was indifferent to God and a Jacob who desired to serve

God. That struggle marked a turning point in the life of Jacob before God. It quite literally left its mark on him.

When the sun rose on Jacob that morning, it rose upon a different, more chastened man. he went on as Israel, one who recognised that he had been in the very presence of God, to fulfil the task to which God had called him, to be the father of his people.

Like all of us, Jacob was a mixture of good and bad, like all of us he was a product of his ancestry and of his past. He had in him something of his mother's unscrupulousness but also his father Isaac's loyalty; some thing of his grandmother Sarah's jealousy and also something of Abraham's far seeing faith. The question was, which side of him was going to predominate. That was the substance of the struggle that night.

There is something timeless about that struggle. It recurs generation after generation in the hearts and minds of mean and nations. In all of us there are things that are good and there is also the darker side. Each of us at some stage or another must come face to face with the conflict within each one of us. Like Jacob, we can I suspect, justify the darker side of our nature to ourselves. 'Sure that is just the way I am'. 'You've got to look after yourself in this world, because if you don't no-one else will.'. But at some stage God brings us face to face with ourselves. This can happen in a number of ways – it may be in the context of some traumatic experience such as the sudden loss of a job, of health or bereavement. It can take the form of a growing realisation of failure in our own lives, till we reach the point we can avoid it no longer. That

actually has the potential to be a life changing experience – one that literally leaves its mark on our lives.

God was with Jacob that night and blessed him as he struggled. he was with him as he went on from that spot, as he travelled to be reconciled with his brother Esau. God is with us as we wrestle with the contradictions in our own lives and personalities as we seek a way forward. That way forward is found in affirming that which is noble and well pleasing to God and putting behind us that which is wrong.

I began this morning reflecting on the nature of history, on the place of individuals in the life and history of a community, of a nation. Ways in which these individuals embody the strengths and frailties of the communities from which they emerge.

As we have followed the story of the Patriarchs in our Old Testament lessons, we see not only their impact on the history of the people of God; we also see in their lives, in the highs and lows of their walk with God, something of our own pilgrimage. As we have come to see God working in their lives, in all their contradictions and fragile humanity, for the advancement of his Kingdom, so may we come to see God's call on our own lives and, offering ourselves as we are, go forward in his presence and in his power to live and work for him in whatever situation we find ourselves.