

Have you ever suffered from a guilty conscience? I don't mean the pangs of regret that come from an isolated incident such as a hasty word spoken in a fit of ill temper. What I am talking about is more a realisation that our attitudes, our behaviour towards others over a period of time has been wrong. We are aware of our failure. We are aware how it has affected other people and we wish it could be different but we do not know where to begin. There can be a real torment within ourselves. The past cannot be changed and people's reaction to us as a result seems to be set.

These sorts of thoughts came to me as I reflected on our Old Testament Lesson this morning. Over the past number of weeks the Old Testament readings have been around the story of Jacob. Jacob was definitely a man with a past. He had tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, deceiving his father Isaac in the process. While Laban, his father-in-law, was no angel, he had run foul of him when his wife Rachel had concealed the family gods when they left home.

Jacob in the process had become a man of some substance, possessing large flocks and a large household. In the eyes of the world he was a success. Yet he was not at peace with himself. In the passage preceding this, he sends message to his brother Esau, offering gifts to appease him, fearful he would take vengeance on him.

In the passage that we read this morning, 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 struggles with a man all night. It is quite clear 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 may have been able to justify his behaviour to himself. Esau did not value his birthright. Laban had deceived him. It had definitely brought him prosperity. But that night, in the stillness of the desert, it did not bring him peace.

But there was another side to the man who struggled with God and with himself that night. For alongside his scheming, Jacob did have 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 his life before God. For that night he was given a new name Israel.

In the Bible, the giving of a new name often marks a new beginning. Simon, when he was called to discipleship, received the name Peter. From that point on, his life involved a transformation of the Simon he was into the Peter Christ called him to be. 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 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 product of his ancestry and his past. He had in him something of his mother's

unscrupulousness, but also his father Isaac's loyalty; something of his grandmother Sarah's jealousy but also Abraham's far seeing faith. The question was, which side of him was going to predominate. That was the substance of his struggle with God that night.

There is something timeless about that struggle. It recurs generation after generation in the hearts and minds of men and of nations. In all of us there are things good and noble and there is also a darker side. In recent days we have seen events to commemorate the Battle of Paschendale – even by the standards of the First World War, this was a battle of unimaginable horror in which half a million men on both sides were killed, injured or disappeared. Yet out of that place of darkness and hopelessness come stories of bravery, of compassion, of humanity.

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. He is with us in our own particular, inner struggles maybe known only to ourselves, as we seek our own particular way forward. That way forward will be found in affirming what is noble and well pleasing to God and putting behind us that which is wrong.

I suppose Jacob was close to despair that night as he struggled in the darkness of the desert. The temptation for us is to despair. But to despair is to say that there is no hope and that surely is a denial of the Gospel. It is to say that our situation, our own particular problems are beyond the scope of God's care. Jacob was to discover that his struggle was in the context of a meeting with

God – that I think is the crucial point. For as we have said over and over again over these last few weeks, God meets us in our strengths and our weaknesses, our virtues and our faults. He is moreover a God of new beginnings, a God who enables us to move from a past of pain and regret into a future of new beginnings.

Father give to us and to all your people
in times of anxiety, serenity;
in times of hardship, courage;
in times of uncertainty, patience;
and, at all times, a quiet trust in your wisdom and love.
Through Christ our Lord.