

23 July Jacob's Ladder (Genesis 28. 10-19)

We, at St Paul's are 'People of Christian faith – Encouraging connection between the Divine and the every day', as we say in our vision statement. Let's reflect on this through the story of Jacob.

I am indebted to Sarah Bachelard¹ for much of this sermon.

Today, Jacob finds himself in our reading, in the strange and liminal place where earth unexpectedly touches heaven, heaven touches earth.

Jacob dreams his remarkable dream as he departs his father Isaac's house. Ostensibly he is going away to find a wife in Paddan-aram; conveniently he is also escaping his elder brother Esau's wrath. Remember he has deceived Isaac into bestowing the blessing meant for Esau on himself. He needs to get away, fast, and his mother Rebekah engineers the excuse. Jacob is instructed not to take a wife from among the Canaanites, but from the family's ancestral homeland and extended kin. On this face-saving pretext, off Jacob went, 'came to a certain place and stayed there for the night'.

Archaeological evidence, so the scholars say, indicate that this place, which Jacob will later call 'Bethel', had been a cultic site for the Canaanites for centuries. But in the Genesis story, 'this pagan background ... is entirely [passed over]: the site is [spoken of as] no more than an anonymous "place" where Jacob decides to spend the night'.² This is interesting since, as we have been discovering, no detail is irrelevant in these finely wrought Genesis stories.

Significantly, the word 'place' occurs six times in this brief passage; 'he came to a certain place', he 'lay down in that place'; when Jacob woke he said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place', 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'. And so on. Place, place, place.

¹ http://benedictus.com.au/pdf/jacobs_ladder_260714.pdf

² Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 148.

Robert Alter suggests that in part, then, ‘this is the tale of the transformation of an anonymous place through vision into Bethel, [which means] a “house of God”’.³ It’s a tale about recognising God as present – here.

This, for me, raises the issue of the relationship between the particular and the universal, between somewhere and everywhere as the site of our encounters with God. God is the Creator, so we say, of heaven and earth; there is no place that God is not. ‘If I ascend to heaven’, writes the psalmist, ‘you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast’ (Ps. 139. 8-9). We do not have to go anywhere in particular to be with God, because God is everywhere.

And yet – there is a paradox. Celtic spirituality speaks of ‘thin places’, places where the veil between heaven and earth is transparent, where the divine breaks through more clearly into mundane experience. The whole creation is infused with the Spirit of God, but that is more evident in some places than others.

Aboriginal spirituality has this same awareness. All land is sacred; all is infused with Spirit and story. But there are particular sacred sites which invite particular awareness. And the same thing happens in our experience of time. All time belongs to God – the whole of our lives can be prayer. Yet our sense of the sacredness of all time requires there to be particular times – the time of our meditation, for example – where we give our time completely to God. Otherwise ‘everywhere’ too readily collapses into ‘nowhere’, and ‘always’ collapses into ‘never’.

So it is that in this place and this time, Jacob encounters God in his dream. What does this experience of God consist in? ‘[H]e dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it’. The Lord stood beside him or above the ladder (depending on the translation) and reiterated the promise made to Abraham and Isaac, the promise concerning land and descendants and blessing.

³ Alter, Genesis, 148.

What Jacob encounters, he says, is the 'gate' of heaven, heaven opened to earth, with God's messengers traversing the space between.

Significantly for us, this is precisely the image that, according to the writer of John's gospel, Jesus uses the very first time he identifies himself. Jesus is speaking to Nathanael, a somewhat sceptical recruit to discipleship (he's the one who asked, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'). When Nathanael is won over and acknowledges Jesus as 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel', Jesus says to him: 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' (John 1.51). Notice now there is no more ladder; now it is Jesus himself who is become the ladder, the communication and means of connection between God and humanity: 'you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'.

In fact, this theme of the opened heaven runs through the whole New Testament witness – from the stories of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan where 'the heavens opened over him', to the vision of Stephen as he is stoned, 'Behold I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7.56), through to the Book of Revelation where we are given the vision of the 'new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Rev. 21. 2).⁴

James Alison says the language of the 'open heaven' is a way of speaking about 'making accessible ... the Father'. We might understand it in terms of the bringing together, the union, of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus and, through him, in ourselves. Yet, as our story shows, this notion of the 'open heaven', of God breaking through into human experience is not confined to the New Testament. The Father of Jesus Christ is the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has ever sought our joining in the divine life and blessing of creation.

So what might all this have to say to us? I'm thinking both of the way the story highlights the significance of place and particularity

⁴ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 78-80.

for divine-human encounter, and of Jacob's vision of the open heaven.

We, at St Paul's are 'People of Christian faith – Encouraging connection between the Divine and the every day'.

We are endeavouring to mediate the experience of the presence of the living God, to live and hold open the possibility of there being a reality other than this one, an open heaven inviting us to see our world in its light at a time when much of our culture has discarded any notion of God. We are seeking to be faithful at this time and place.

I believe that we may encounter God anywhere, and that we need particular places and times that intensify and focus the possibility of that encounter. I believe that our lives are already encompassed by transcendent reality, and that we need persons and communities who have let their lives be transformed by this reality to make it visible and accessible to others. And I believe this is what a community like ours has a vocation to be – a community of practice that witnesses to the open heaven, holding wide the gate and learning to let its own life be transfigured by the encounter.

Jacob's story, I said before, is 'the tale of the transformation of an anonymous place through vision into Bethel, [which means] a "house of God"'. That's a vision worth having, a dream worth dreaming – don't you think?

As you listen to a song, we will hand out some stones. I invite you to sit with them, and remember, 'God is in this place'. Take it with you and place it somewhere, at home, or at work, to remind you, 'God is in this place.' Or place the stone somewhere where you feel God close saying "God is in this place."

STONES

1. At the dawn of the ages
you pulled land from the sea.
With your word you invented
all we know, all we see:
creek and desert and forest,

red and grey kangaroo.
You were in this place—
but we never knew.

2. Paintings seen on the rock face,
footprints left in the sand,
campfire next to the river,
songs that rise from the land:
signs that seem so elusive,
shadows just out of view.
You were in this place —
but we never knew.

3. Do we take after Jacob,
blind to what lies at hand,
needing dreams to inform us
God is here in this land?
See him suffering and dying,
Bread and wine tell the news.
You were in this place—
but we never knew.

4. Jesus, open our senses,
help us see you today
in the person beside us,
as we work, as we play.
While we love you and serve you, may it never be true:
you were in this place —
but we never knew.

Robin Mann

Susanna