



AUTUMN EDUCATION PROGRAMME 2010

**The Alpha and the Omega – the First and the Last
The Bible Opened for All**

“Truth, honesty and integrity belong to spirituality, and it’s important in the face of modernity to acknowledge doubt as a reality.”

Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed

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Being Biblical, Being Broken and Blessed

Lecture 4 in the St Martin-in-the-Fields Autumn Education Programme
The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last: The Bible Opened for All

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The Bible can be very threatening to people with disabilities and their families: it seems full of miracle-stories, which can either raise unreasonable hopes, which are then constantly dashed, or make you feel very angry and excluded. Besides that, it encourages other people to tell you that if you only had enough faith you could be cured, and so make you feel inadequate. Even worse is the use of the Bible to suggest that impairment is a punishment for some wrong-doing. 'What on earth have the parents done to have children like this?' asked the driver of a minibus hired to take them to a Mencap club.

Part of the problem lies in the way people focus on only selected bits of the Bible without noticing that what it seems to say in one place is challenged or corrected in another; for example, when Jesus heals the paralytic in Mark's Gospel (2.1-12), he first tells him that his sins are forgiven, which might mean his illness was the result of his sin, but when he heals the blind man in John's Gospel (9.1-7), and the disciples ask who sinned, this man or his parents, he replies neither – he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. So there's the problem of fitting different texts together, but there's also the problem of interpretation. The Bible is a very complex collection of different books by different authors produced over many different centuries – a record of people encountering God, falling short of God's glory, finding salvation in all kinds of different ways. In that sense it's a human book full of human testimony. However, it can become the medium whereby God speaks to us – the Word of God communicated through that testimony. Sometimes that comes as a flash of insight from a single verse. But to jump to conclusions on that basis can be very damaging. You need to put particular verses into the overall context of the Bible as a whole, and have some rules of thumb to guide interpretation. Many over the centuries have said that those rules of thumb are to be found in Jesus' commandments to love God and love your neighbour – only an interpretation which fits with that can be right.

What I shall do tonight is explore one rather strange biblical story. I will show how differently it has been interpreted over history, and how the story itself challenges the literal way many people want to interpret the Bible today. Then I will show how it takes us into the theme, 'broken and blessed', and how it leads us to consider other parts of the Bible with the same theme. Along the way I'll show how my story fits in, and how the Bible has helped me.

Read Genesis 32.26-32.

So here's Jacob. He'd stolen the birthright from his older twin, Esau, and had been in exile. Now he's returning and has reached the boundary of the territory. Given the deceit whereby he'd obtained the inheritance, he's not unnaturally worried about possible revenge. He sends generous gifts in advance as a sign of peace, makes preparations for the fateful meeting, and then waits alone at the brook Jabbok. A man wrestles with him, but the stranger couldn't prevail against Jacob. He struck Jacob's hip, however, and Jacob was disabled. Jacob won't let go of his assailant without a blessing. The stranger wants to know who Jacob is, and implicitly in the act of revealing his identity, Jacob admits he's a cheat. He's given a new name, 'Israel'. Jacob now wants to know the name of his contender; the question isn't answered, though the blessing is given. Jacob then calls this place 'Penuel', because he's seen God here and lived – it was, of course, stated elsewhere in scripture that no-one may see God and live (e.g. Exod. 33.20). Finally he limps off, and soon Esau runs to meet him, embraces and kisses him, and they weep together.

It is a very strange story. What would it mean to take it literally?

- To start with, was the stranger a man or God? The story shifts somewhere in the middle.
- Then was Jacob the winner or the loser? It says to start with that the stranger didn't prevail against Jacob, and he begged Jacob to let him go. But then the stranger is the one who wounds Jacob, leaving him lame, and then gives him a blessing, implying his superiority.
- Then all those names seem to have some kind of meaning: Jabbok, the name of the brook, means 'wrestling'; Israel means 'one who has striven with God'; Penuel means 'the face of God'; and the story ends by explaining the laming – it's all about a food-taboo: 'to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle on the hip socket'. So is it meant to be taken literally? And what is going on?

Faced with these puzzles, and these clues, modern commentators have reconstructed a history of how the story developed before being written down. Probably it derives from very ancient folk tales, told by word of mouth, and has already received layers of interpretation before being incorporated into the biblical story of Israel's ancestor.

One commentator asserts, "It is not God but a hostile demon that attacks the traveller, and this does not in any way change right to the end of the narrative."¹ In other words, the story was reported and then interpreted as it was incorporated into Genesis, and we can see the seams. This explains why there is that shift from the stranger to God. This commentator identifies the stranger as originally "the river demon who wanted to stop him crossing", describing it as powerful at night but losing strength at daybreak – a common folkloric motif. There is an animist notion in the background, he suggests, whereby if one knows

¹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 519; discussion from pp. 516-21

the name of the spirit, one has power over it and might extort power for one's own benefit. That's why Jacob wants to know the name of the stranger, though he's never actually told it.

Another commentator² lists the layers that can be identified in the story – in addition to the notion of a “river spirit who has to be placated or defeated before the traveller can cross”, and “the belief that spirits or ghosts who haunt the night are doomed to disappear before daybreak”, he notes that it provides explanations of a number of things, as many old stories used to do: so it explains (1) the name of the brook – Jabbok, (2) the name ‘Israel’, (3) the place-name, Penuel, which possibly was a sanctuary where worship involved a limping ritual dance, and (4) the origin of that food-taboo.

Most commentators recognize that now, placed here in the text of Genesis, the story legitimizes Jacob's stolen blessing and prepares the way for reconciliation with Esau. So we might say that Jacob's struggle is, in a sense, with his fear of Esau, and his conscience represented by the man who becomes God. But it's even more than that, because what may once have been a midnight struggle with a demon or an angel, in which the hero with superhuman strength almost overcomes the mysterious supernatural being so as to get power for himself, has now become the story of Jacob's surrender of his name and identity to the God who becomes known as the God of Israel. Placed in a grand narrative about the origins of the people of Israel, it provides a kind of summing up Israel's history with God.³ As one commentator puts it, summing up the over-arching story of what Christians call the Old Testament, “The history of the people of Israel was often to be a tale of just such an encounter with God; a costly turbulent struggle in the darkness of tragedy, exile and persecution, but an authentic experience in which they came face to face with God.”⁴

So is this the literal meaning? What do we mean by literal when there seem to be layers of meaning in the text?

I want now to contrast this whole approach with some earlier ways of interpretation. You see, Christians have traditionally not looked for the literal or historical meaning, but they have actually read themselves into the stories of the Bible. About this story Luther wrote:

And so we have this noble chapter, in which you see the marvellous dealing of God with his saints for our comfort and example, so that we may daily ask ourselves if he is also at work with us and be prepared for it.⁵

Charles Wesley spelt this out in a great poem, sometimes sung as a hymn but not too often – it's a bit long and not a well-known tune. But it is a great example of what Luther meant about the story being for our comfort and example. The story is related to Charles Wesley's own soul and its salvation. Like Jacob he finds himself left alone to wrestle with a stranger.

Come, O thou Traveller unknown, I need not tell thee who I am,

² Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, pp.183-5

³ See e.g. von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 319 ff

⁴ Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, p. 186

⁵ Quoted by von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 326

Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
name;

And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

My misery and sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my

Look on thy hands, and read it there:
But who, I ask thee, who art thou?
Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

So like Jacob he knows himself a sinner and is struggling with his conscience. He wants to know the name of the stranger, but already we can begin to guess that the stranger is Christ, the God-Man – that ambiguity in the story is slowly clarified, as we shall see.

In vain thou strugglest to get free;
I never will unloose my hold!
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold:
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

Wilt thou not yet to me reveal
Thy new, unutterable name?
Tell me, I still beseech thee, tell;
To know it now resolved I am:
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

What though my shrinking flesh complain,
And murmur to contend so long?
I rise superior to my pain,
When I am weak, then I am strong;
prayer;
And when my all of strength shall fail,
I shall with the God-Man prevail.

Yield to me now; for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair;
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
Be conquered by my instant
Speak, or thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if thy name is Love.

'Tis Love! 'Tis Love! Thou diedst for me! My prayer has power with God; the
grace

I hear the whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
Pure, universal love thou art;
To me, to all, thy mercies move:
Thy nature and thy name is Love.

Unspeakable I now receive;
Through faith I see thee face to face,
I see thee face to face, and live!
In vain I have not wept and strove:
Thy nature and thy name is Love.

So to see God's face and live, as Jacob did, is to receive God's grace, to know that God is love. And what's more, the loving stranger won't disappear with the dawn, stay and love to the end.

I know thee, Saviour, who thou art,
Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend;
Nor wilt thou with the night depart,
from thee

But stay and love me to the end;
Thy mercies never shall remove:
Thy nature and thy name is Love.

The Sun of Righteousness on me
Has risen with healing in his wings;
Withered my nature's strength,

My soul its life and succour brings;
My help is all laid up above:
Thy nature and thy name is Love.

Yet the soul limps on life's journey as a result of this encounter – it's been lamed, disabled, and yet empowered because dependent on God alone and not on its own strength.

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| Contented now upon my thigh I halt, till life's short journey end; o'ercome; | Lame as I am, I take the prey, Hell, earth and sin with ease |
| All helplessness, all weakness, I On thee alone for strength depend; home, | I leap for joy, pursue my way, And as a bounding hart fly |
| Nor have I power from thee to move: Thy nature and thy name is Love. | Through all eternity to prove Thy nature and thy name is Love. |

So Charles Wesley has made the story his own and discovered there the evangelical message of salvation.

Charles Wesley was not the first to see Christ in this story. The earliest Christians found the presence of the Son of God in all kinds of Old Testament stories. Some of you may know the famous Rublev icon of the Trinity – that is actually a depiction of the story of Abraham entertaining angels unawares, but understood as a revelation of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a very old tradition going right back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. This story of Jacob's wrestling was a classic story for identifying revelations of the pre-existent Christ in the Old Testament – Christ, both man and God.

In the majority of the early church references, there is no emphasis on the wrestling, only on the appearance of God in human form. Some, however, did enquire about the wrestling: St. Clement of Alexandria draws on this story in a work called *Paedagogus*.⁶ Now a *paedagogus* was a slave who had the task of accompanying the child to school, overseeing his studies and generally making sure he did the equivalent of homework – in other words, he had a function something like an instructor or trainer. Clement's book describes how the Word incarnate in Jesus is the 'pedagogue' who trains us for salvation. So in this story the Son of God appears as Jacob's instructor or trainer, wrestles with him and anoints him against evil. The Word acts as a trainer for the athlete of God, giving him practice for contending against the powers of evil.

Clement's successor, Origen, gives it a slightly different twist:⁷ human nature is limited and powerless in the struggle against evil powers, so the angel wrestled with Jacob, not in the sense of *against* him, but rather *alongside* him. The angel is there to help Jacob in the struggle against evil, wrestling against the principalities and powers that Paul says we have to contend with. This is a spiritual fight, wrestling to endure sufferings, to avoid being provoked into fierce anger, excessive sorrow, the depths of despair or complaint against God. And all this leads Origen into a discussion of the story of Job. So the wrestling became a 'type' of human spiritual struggles, through which we receive God's blessing.

⁶ *Paedagogus* I.vii

⁷ *On First Principles* III.ii.5

Later, St. Augustine, in one of his many treatments of this story, thinks the wrestling is to hold onto Christ, which means the struggle to love one's enemy – for if you love your enemy, you do indeed hold Christ.⁸

St. John Chrysostom, the greatest preacher of the ancient world, whose nickname means 'Goldenmouth', gives us the most extended discussion of the story in his *Homilies* (i.e. Sermons) *on Genesis*, a running series that follows the text of Genesis right through. Here the story is related to the context, namely the whole issue of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. For Chrysostom, the incident is a demonstration of God's *philanthrōpia* – love for humanity: it shows how God allowed Jacob to wrestle with what is right in the form of a man, so that he would learn not to go to that fateful meeting with bad feelings. Jacob must choose fearfulness, and not meet his brother in a spirit of contest. The man tries to leave because he recognises Jacob's righteousness, but Jacob demands a blessing. Furthermore, the story demonstrates Jacob's faith in asking to know who his assailant is. Thus Chrysostom works through the story line by line, often by implication drawing out morals applicable to the Christian pilgrimage of faith. The climax of the homily is a celebration of reconciliation and of God's love in the incarnation, of which this story provides a 'type'. This is a typical example of how the Fathers found examples for their congregations to follow through their exegesis of scripture.

Generally speaking, then, Jacob is an example for the believer and the stranger is Christ; but St. Ambrose⁹ took another approach – he suggested we should imitate Christ in Jacob, linking the paralysing of the thigh with the passion. In other words, we should 'take up our cross', as Jacob did.

St. Augustine provided another way of linking the story with the passion:¹⁰ the fact that Jacob prevailed over the angel represents the passion of Christ, Christ being the 'willing loser' who, though he allows himself to be overcome and crucified, is yet the victor over the powers of evil. Jacob receives blessing from the angel he defeated, implying that Christ blesses the human race which slew him; and, as the name he's given means 'seeing God', so he receives in anticipation the vision of God which is the reward for the saints at the end of the world.

This exploration of how the early Fathers of the Church treated one particular enigmatic story has demonstrated how it was possible to play with the text, find multiple meanings through inspired insight, and read one story in terms of another; but it also gives rise to the question whether all interpretations are valid, and how we might establish criteria for deciding what might or might not be appropriate. One criterion which seems vital for Christian interpretation is the context and form of the story as it appears in the canon. The origins of the story might be illuminated by talk of a fight with a river demon, but that doesn't seem very relevant, and in any case it was re-minted as the story was incorporated into the Bible. The words of the text point to various possible interpretations, but at the core is the idea of Jacob wrestling with God, a mysterious Being discerned in

⁸ *Sermon V.6*

⁹ *Again On Duties I.120*

¹⁰ *City of God XVI.39*

human form, and being disabled, blessed and given a new name through the contest. It is this which is captured and made relevant to Christian believers in our final example, from St. Gregory of Nazianzus.

The theme of one of Gregory's addresses¹¹ is God's transcendence, the God who is beyond our comprehension. During the discussion he mentions glimmerings of this in scripture, including Jacob wrestling with God in human form. Gregory is not at all clear what this wrestling means, but he notes that Jacob bore on his body the marks of the wrestling and this signifies the defeat and disablement of the created nature. The climax of what he says is this:

Neither he, nor any of his descendants in the twelve tribes who made up the children of Israel, could boast that he comprehended the whole nature or the pure sight of God.

For Gregory the story is about the human struggle to know God, and its ultimate failure because we are mere creatures. It's only because God accommodates the divine self to our human level, through the inevitably limited human language of scripture, and above all by accepting the constraints of incarnation, that we have any chance of knowing anything about God.

Maybe this will prove to be for us the most insightful treatment of the story we have found among the Fathers. My aim is not to suggest that we take over any of these interpretations, but rather explore the freedom with which they approached the text, so as to find patterns and approaches that make sense to us. Charles Wesley was in the same tradition when he gave evangelical meaning to this story. What would it mean for us to follow suit?

For 250 years European culture has been struggling with the problem of suffering and the question of God. Wrestling with God began in earnest with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Suddenly it no longer made sense to speak of a created order ruled by a gracious providence when tens of thousands had apparently died senselessly. This event, together with the questions about arbitrary and innocent suffering which it raised, has meant that the dominant question has become theodicy (i.e. how to justify the way of God in the face of evil and suffering), and it still is – if you saw the recent TV programmes 'The Big Silence', you'll remember the lad from Glasgow overwhelmed by this question. For the 20th century has done little to alleviate this. The 1st World War ended the illusion of heroism as millions died or were traumatized in the trenches. The dehumanised and industrialised genocide of the Holocaust, not only demonstrated 'man's inhumanity to man', but also called in question the idea of the Biblical God who protected his Chosen People. The advent of radio and television has revealed the sheer ongoing scale of human suffering and atrocity. A University colleague of Jewish descent once commented to me, "If I were God I wouldn't let my children do to each other what we humans do." God's morality is in question, and the best option after Auschwitz appears to be atheism. Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for*

¹¹ His 2nd *Theological Oration*

Godot, captures the mood – there is no God to intervene and sort things out; God either doesn't exist or is a demon.¹²

So we've all been wrestling with a God who turned out to be powerless. Like Jacob we've found ourselves prevailing, and many have decided God is dead. People have easily lost their faith, especially in the face of personal tragedy. So now for the majority God has become a mere expletive! For most the wrestling is over, and they are neither lamed nor blessed.

Yet for some, including myself, wrestling with God has been a desperate plea for blessing, hanging on in there like Jacob, and getting lamed in the process. The struggle centred on my severely disabled son, Arthur.

Let me introduce him briefly. He is now 43 years old, and we have been changing nappies all those years. He has no language, no self-help skills and uses a wheelchair – we have to feed him, dress him and do everything for him. He was a full term baby, but was born premature weight and with an abnormally small head and brain because the placenta was insufficient and he was deprived of oxygen and nourishment in the final months of pregnancy. He became for me the symbol of all the 'gone-wrongness' that modernity has identified as a good reason for calling God in question.

My account of early Christian interpretation had Gregory as its climax because he provides the clue to one way in which that story of Jacob might speak to us. In the end it is the creature that is disabled, defeated in the attempt to know God. For the whole nature of God is beyond creaturely comprehension. Wrestling with God we may think to prevail, to be master, only to discover that we are the ones to be marked by the struggle and given a new name. For at the heart of that struggle with God is an experience of loss of security and self-sufficiency, of being put in one's place. In the end it is not that we judge God, rather God judges us; and that implies a need to reconfigure our notions of God. We imagine we are in control, we make up our minds, we decide whether we are religious or not, we choose whether to seek God or not.... But the whole point is that we are mere limited creatures, vulnerable, far from in control, certainly not capable of grasping God's reality off our own bat.

The well-known 20th century mystic, Thomas Merton¹³ speaks of "the one big concept" which "was to revolutionize his whole life" – the Latin word *aseitas*; let me quote what he says and you'll get the meaning:

In this one word, which can be applied to God alone, and which expresses His most characteristic attribute, I discovered an entirely new concept of God – a concept which showed me at once that the belief of Catholics was by no means the vague and rather superstitious hangover from an unscientific age that I had believed it to be. Here was a notion of God that was at the same time deep, simple and accurate and charged with implications which I could at least dimly estimate. *Aseitas* simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is

¹² This paragraph owes much to my article, 'Suffering', in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*

¹³ *Elected Silence*, p. 139

to exist. There can be only one such Being: that is God. And to say that God exists *a se*, of and by reason of Himself, is merely to say that God is Being Itself. "I am what I am."

For many years I wrestled and doubted, unable to make any sense of it all – how could I go on believing in a good Creator God when something had gone so wrong in the very act of creating a new human being? How could I go on believing that God had a purpose for everyone, to become saints, when here was someone who would apparently never be capable of any independent moral choices? Then one day I was stopped short – I can feel that moment as I got up to go into the kitchen to do some ordinary everyday chore, and as I did so, I had a 'loud thought': "It makes no difference to me whether you believe in me or not." And I suddenly realized that if God just is, that must be true, and it put me in my place.

Pondering the book of Job, that intense debate about God's goodness within the Bible, I began to discern that the answer to Job's questioning was simply the fact that he found himself in God's presence. In God's presence all the questions just fade away as you realise the immensity of the infinite, divine reality with which you are confronted.

So back to the story of Wrestling Jacob, and to the way in which it is sometimes associated with the story of Job – the Bible encourages us to be honest with our doubts about God, with our anguish about the way the world is and our frustration at God's absence. "Was Job blaspheming?" a devout student once asked me in class. It was an opportunity to contest the notion that you should suppress questions and doubts in prayer. The Psalms give us words in which to express these feelings, and the Jewish tradition of challenging and complaining against God is surely one that Christians can learn from. Truth, honesty and integrity belong to spirituality, and it's important in the face of modernity to acknowledge the experience of doubt as a reality. The Fathers sometimes saw the 'type' of Christ in Jacob, and the wrestling and wounding as foreshadowing the cross; and maybe we can align with it the agony in the garden and the cry of desolation. Jesus, in his identification with us, was tried and tested in all points as we are, says the Epistle to the Hebrews, and that sense of abandonment by God, as well as the struggle to say, 'Thy will not mine', speaks to the same desperation as we feel in the face of atrocity and inexplicable destruction.

Apart from the passion of Christ – that extraordinary story of God bridging the gulf and plumbing the depths of all that is gone wrong in humanity, there is no simple theoretical answer to the theodicy questions, just partial palliatives. In the book of Job we see how the presence of God puts everything into a different perspective. Job's complaints and doubts disappear before the reality of God, which is humbling and judging and renewing. At the end of I Corinthians 13 Paul says, "Now I know only in part"; he expects to "know fully" in the future, but shifts the focus by adding, "even as I have been fully known". God's knowledge of us is both wonderful and fearful, according to Psalm 139. In the end we are put in our place. The spiritual struggle is put on a different footing. It's not about us wrestling with God, but about wrestling with ourselves until the created nature is defeated and we are fit to receive God's blessing.

For better far than simply the end of the struggle is receiving the blessing – now put in my place, intellectually disabled, one might say, I realised how much I receive blessing through Arthur. He ministers to me. It is with him I find the fruits of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Not for nothing do we find in the Bible texts like Psalm 51: ‘the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.’ Or the upside down world of the Beatitudes: those who are blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the persecuted – not the successful, the competent, those upbeat people, full of the joy of life. In Jesus’ parables, it’s the Prodigal Son, returning in his humiliation and shameful regrets, who is welcomed with love and gets the party, not the righteous elder son, and it’s the tax-collector begging for mercy who has his prayers answered, not the Pharisee.

So I would say that after all those years of struggling with the questions, I discovered that through Arthur I have been given privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity. I stand alongside him as a vulnerable creature, disabled and mortal, knowing my creaturely limitations and my lack of knowledge, especially of God. I know my need of God and my resistance to God’s grace, the inner demons like self-pity that so easily take over my interior life. Yet again and again I find myself lamed and blessed. I discern signs of God’s presence, I meet God in human form, I discover glimpses of Christ, in the faces of some of the most damaged and disabled human persons. One such occasion was during the Faith and Light pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1991 when the story of Mary Magdalene meeting the Risen Christ, whom she thought was the gardener, was mimed by a woman with profound learning disabilities, and Jesus was played by a man with Down’s Syndrome.

So, as for Charles Wesley, then also for me, that curious Bible story of Wrestling Jacob has become a symbol, a ‘type’, of the Christian life as I’ve experienced it and, broken and blessed, I too have discovered that the name of the one with whom I struggle is indeed LOVE.