

Grappling.

A Sermon for in-between times



Working with appointed readings in a local church....

Gen 32:22-31

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 2Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' 27 So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' 28 Then the man^[b] said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,^[c] for you have striven with God and with humans,^[d] and have prevailed.' 29 Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel,^[e] saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life

is preserved.’ 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

2 Tim 3:14-4:5

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, **knowing from whom you learned it**, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is^[b] useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 proclaim the message; **be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable**; convince, **rebuke, and encourage**, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. 5 As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Luke 18:1-8

18 Then Jesus told them a parable about their need **to pray always and not to lose heart**. 2 He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” 4 For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”’^[b] 6 And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’

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After four years with churches developing their relationship with Creation, I'm all for that idea in Paul's letter to Timothy that scripture "equips us."

Our immersion into the poems and stories of the Bible is a real resource for justice, for resilience, for survival.

Christianity - especially in the diversity of the World Council of Churches, -Christianity finds identity as one of God's great gifts for the good of the Earth. Though we can't do everything for everyone.

That's why it's best to put Paul's idea of **scripture-as-treasured-resource** together with Jesus's own image of the scribe of the kingdom, who brings out of their box of treasures both new and old. [Matt 13: 51-2]

Discernment is involved, making the best of what comes to hand. **In an emergency**, there's only so much treasure you can carry with you.

The **stuff we leave in the box** may be treasures, but not what we need right now.

You don't get the Christmas tree out for Easter Sunday. Though, powerfully, some churches upcycle an Easter cross from the Christmas tree. Tracing the living Tree in the life of Christ.

Times and seasons change. Likewise choices we urgently need to make, like Jacob's choice as to which limb of the attacker to hold on to. What to take, what to leave? The people on the front line of the crisis, who first raised the alarm, know all about that.

As do those made homeless even in the USA, in Germany, and other rich countries, by extremes which human activity **has made** frequent.

Faith offer so many different ways of conveying good news. We may not need all of them all of the time. Could we travel lighter, and still be God's faithful people?

And, taking that idea of seasons more broadly: as the figures on global warming, sea-level rise, ocean heating and acidification, the melting of glaciers, the extinction of animals and the destruction of ecosystems consistently worsen day by day - in the **season** of climate crisis, might it mean rethinking the usefulness of the already multiply recycled seasons of the Christian year?

The Earth has tended until now, to get left behind in our project. Strange, that! A character mentioned something like a thousand times in the Bible. See what it does for how it feels, when you think "who" rather than "it" for the Earth, and spell Earth with a capital, too!

There's another jewel languishing in the basket, which is the consciousness not simply of the **cycle** of **seasons**, but the **succession** of **ages**.

Matthew's version of the Great Commission offers us Jesus' promise to be with us '**to the end of the Age**', which pious eagerness has often smoothed out into an open-ended '**always**'.

But 'always' is misleading. 'Always' can seem like "no further cause for wrestling, or engaging with change".

And yet our heritage is one in which faithfulness is validated by the readiness to read the signs of the times. Including their endings.

Indeed, the earthly life of each one of us, will come to an end. That's how we're made. Sharing the fragility of all life. Even the life of the planet; their balance and stability which has cradled our cultures and religions since the last Ice Age.

Now, of course, our horror -and I hope you **do** feel horror - at Bible stories, like the genocide of the Amalekites, the ethnic cleansing campaigns of Ezra/Nehemiah, and Joshua, blaming God for mass murder of women, children **and animals** at the Battle of

Jericho, let alone the enslavement of starving Egyptians by Joseph, who might as well have worked for one of our energy companies... all of these things should remind us never to take it for granted that scripture is simply **exemplary**.

Though some of the songs we learned as children might have suggested that.

Sometimes Scripture shows us where **not** to go. What **not** to do.

Thus not to **wrestle** with the Bible, is neither really to read it, nor, as the sun rises, to receive its blessing. As Jacob, who stayed the fight, was blessed.

The journey from baffling ancient text to living and beneficial Scripture for our day is not a solitary one. It's a journey - or perhaps a wrestling tag-match - with good company and discernment.

First of all, the translators, with their very particular agenda.

Then what we add ourselves. Which is fine, as long as we accept that Scripture is a process, a relationship.

Paul supports this with details which it's easy to skim over: scripture and tradition, morals and customs are **never** neutrally presented. Get used to that.

Because it means that someone somewhere has made a choice about what you hear and how to hear it.

It may well be a good choice. But will it be well-enough informed, without your own choice, to activate those treasures which will help you, your neighbour, your church, your world?

As Paul, chancing it on reputation, wrote to Timothy: our most trusted teachers give us a glimpse of what it might be that the Spirit is saying to the churches today.

But even to respect and value **them**, a wee bit of wrestling might be in order, if we're to savour their blessing.

Which means that, in this Age of Endings -although environmental chaplaincy is here to support and encourage local leaders, priests, pastors ministers, lay-leaders or whatever fits the bill -in this age of locked-in change, which will be with us well beyond our own lifetimes, the greater priority is to build up **confidence** of leaders **and** congregations in their **own** ability and calling, responsibly to **recycle**, even to **repurpose**, rather than dutifully, submissively and unquestioningly to re-use our wonderful spiritual heritage as global Christians.

People in the pews of the local churches today know more about the climate crisis than big-name theologians for whom it never appeared on the radar. You all have a contribution to make to Good News for every creature.

This, though, is not one of those sermons which says simplistically: previous generations all got it wrong, whereas we, modern sophisticated people have finally got it all right.

Indeed, one of my fondest discoveries has been a prayer from the 4th century, which affirms the value in their own right and the right to 'the sweetness of life' of fellow creatures. That prayer is wonderfully useful right now.

Poetry and spiritual song **cannot** be valued only by price tags. Though scientists now are attaching them to natural assets in an attempt to convince the money-men that what is beautiful is also objectively valuable.

The whale, who captures carbon throughout their life, might be said, like those online celebrities, to have a 'net worth' running into millions.

And yet, equally, our reverence for the Word of God should not exclude fringe benefits. It doesn't have to be **financially** useful, but neither is it required to be useless. With apologies to Lloyd Webber, the church is not "The Really Useless Company".

So if, as a church, you do scour your treasures for appropriate responses of faith to the state of the planet, look for those which are most rewarding and encouraging.

It might be attending to waste, getting rid of plastic in the church. It might simply be prayer with room for the voice of the Earth. But what builds you up? Don't under-estimate how much help you need, even to get to the end of the week.

"To labour and not to ask for any reward..." is only half a sentence, made misleadingly macho by abbreviation. That quotation continues with the huge reservation *"save that of knowing that we do your will"*. That's big. That's greedy, even. Because the will of God is for justice, for delight, for health. God so loves the world....

Pray and live that that will be done.

The will of God was the justice that widow was after from the judge. The will of God is to receive the praise of everything which has breath.

Look closely, and Creation is side by side, in the same breath, and thoroughly mixed up with justice. The ancient Hebrews made that leap, that the God who ends enslavement of their creatures is also the God who **makes** life good.

What I can't evade, is that a wall **has** been built up in the last couple of centuries, obscuring where Earth is called upon by God to **police** human injustice.

And with the wall, the unsustainable idea that God gives to our species exclusively, the world as a habitat which it turns out sustains and **requires the weaving** of every other thread in the web of life.

At college I was actively discouraged from bothering with the Great Commission of Christ *Risen* in Mark's Gospel, ..to be good news for every creature.

Now, there were scholarly reasons **for** that, but whose agenda, should decide what's in and what's out? What is an appropriate criterion?

How about: what do we **need** to hear today?

How, like Jacob, can we be **equipped** to face these threats? The Deuteronomy Passage, reminds us that "Israel" which we'll be pinning on Jesus in Christmas carols in a few weeks time, is a name not chosen to tell truth that emerges through life and death struggle. For the Bible usefully shares with us the experiences of those who have been there. Done that, worn the blessing. Even if we limp.

A minister in a church I visited recently asked me why people come to church at all? Indeed, what is our faith for?

You may have answers, and each may be sufficient for you, but in amongst that repertoire, is one not yet dominant in our culture of Mammon, where unlimited and exploitative economic growth is presented - even incompetently - as the truth you mustn't argue with.

For me, faith is the joyful shout at Palm Sunday - Hosanna - God help us!

A cry for help, which is a claim on relationship. Like the young woman from Pakistan to whom I promised I would pass on to you what she impressed upon me in Germany - that the floods in Pakistan are not a 'natural' disaster, but represent an injustice for which the richer nations are directly and causally responsible.

And here it is in old and new testaments. Desperation. A struggle with a violent stranger in the dark. The widow: amongst the most marginalised and powerless in the society of Bible times, suffering Christ knows what hardship, humiliation, harm and danger under that umbrella of the need for justice. I've met her.

At COP, at the World Council of Churches, online. She's your sister in Christ. Protesting at the parliament .

Are we the judge? or are we egging her on, learning from her determination.

That's what we are here for. Not to preserve, but to live justly, then hand on life.