



OPENING WORDS Jesus calls us here to meet him as, through word and song and prayer, we affirm God's promised presence where his people live and care. (STF 28)

HYMN STF 544

1 As the deer pants for the water,
so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.

*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*

2 I want you more than gold or silver,
only you can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy-giver
and the apple of my eye.

3 You're my friend and you are my brother,
even though you are a king.
I love you more than any other,
so much more than anything.

Martin J. Nystrom (b.1956)

PRAYER

We Reach into our church traditions and into scripture as we pray:

We praise you, O God, we acclaim you as the Lord;

All creation worships you, the Father everlasting.

To you all angels, all the power of Heaven, the cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise:

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of prayer and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. **Amen**

Yet even in the face of such greatness we fail and we confess our shortcomings in the words of Paul:

I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Who will rescue me from this?

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! **Amen**

READINGS Genesis 32:22 – 31 and 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

HYMN STF 160 Christopher Idle (b. 1938)

1 Powerful in making us wise to salvation,
witness to faith in Christ Jesus the Word ;
breathed out for all by the life-giving Father
- these are the scriptures, and thus speaks the
Lord.

2 Hammer for action and compass for travel,
map in the desert and lamp in the dark ;
teaching, rebuking, correcting and training —
these are the scriptures, and this is their
work.

3 Prophecy, history, song and commandment,
gospel and letter and dream from on high ;
words of the wise who were steered by the
Spirit —
these are the scriptures ; on them we rely.

4 Gift for God's servants to fit them completely,
fully equipping to walk in his ways ;
guide to good work and effective believing —
these are the scriptures ; for these we give
praise !

SERMON

The hero – or should I say antihero – of today's OT lesson is Jacob - described succinctly by one Biblical commentator as an "ugly piece of work" . He was already fighting his twin brother in the womb then as a young man he cheated his brother Esau out of his birth right for a mess of potage – and of his father's blessing.

Now after many years apart, Jacob is once again to meet his brother Esau whom he swindled.

He is perhaps naturally apprehensive and fearful – so He prays to God for protection from his hairy brother's anger – but hedging his bets he also sends his family ahead with many gifts!

Jacob remains for the night alone by the River Jabbok and here we picked up the story in our reading.

The story warrants a careful reading. It's fascinating. Enough at the moment to note that it is a story in which the relationship between God and Jacob is changed through a struggle. A struggle we may note that was not of Jacob's initiating but of God's.

There is a dangerous heresy which treats the Christian life as a casual walk in the park, with no stress, no strain.

If you've got a problem, just say a quick prayer to God and he will put everything right at the drop of a hat.....If you've got a question, just dip into the Scriptures and the answer will pop out as easy as that

But of course, the Christian life isn't like that.

Even Jesus himself struggled with temptation- think of being tempted in the wilderness and in Gethsemane.

If you want to know God, you need to be prepared to wrestle –

Our reading from the letter to Timothy warns us that we have to wrestle with scripture. It contains one of the all-time favourite memory verses:

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Sadly, that has sometimes led to division amongst the Christian community.

I used to live in an area where one of the more lively and evangelical churches displayed its mission statement outside. One of its points was that it was a “bible believing church”. That always puzzled me. Are there others? Are there churches who week by week get to the reading and say “We didn't think we'd use the bible today. We don't believe it.”

Of course not.

What that church meant was that they take a more literalist view of scripture than some others who might interpret more. Unfortunately, there was also a sub text of “and we are right”.

There are those who use scripture as identity markers, boundary keepers, and, ultimately, means for self-justification.

If you take Deuteronomy seriously, should you ever see someone with a Peaky Blinders haircut wearing a polycotton shirt and eating prawn cocktail, you will shout, “Abomination!” (There are prohibitions on cutting hair at the sides of your head, wearing mixed fibres and eating shellfish.) Those are visible markers that singled out the people of God.

And let us not forget the use of the bible in keeping people in their place and supporting slavery.

The trouble is we confuse inspiration with inerrancy. Scripture is inspired, it's a word that is connected with breathing. It is infused with life ...God's life. And that life takes on a life of its own in our hearts as we read.

That's good news. It touches us and changes us.

The trouble is that this sometimes demands of us wisdom and discernment because it's easy to decide that something is from God because it suits us rather than because we have really tuned ourselves in with a prayerful and willing mind to wrestle with the question of how the word speaks and lives and breathes - not in Timothy's time but in mine? Not in his country but here, in our neighbourhoods.

Which is why it is important to read scripture with other people. In church, in bible study groups. It is reading it with other faithful people that really guards us against our temptations to make it say whatever we want.

It puts us on a wider map than “me myself and I” .

We need to listen to what the saints have said in the past and immerse ourselves in the stories of what God has said in the past because that enables us able to competently discern the words God is breathing now.

When do I need, we need to be seen as having absolute values and be counter cultural (modern answer to purity) and when do we need to let go of what we were taught in Sunday school and let the bible dialogue with what's going on in our complicated world?

But you know at the end of the night, which in Hebrew storytelling, as in our modern thrillers, so often speaks of the unknown and terror, at the end of the night is the dawn.

It is the dawn that brings Jacob a new name, a new life, a wound to carry for the rest of his life – and a blessing.

Wrestling with scripture - rather than just giving it a polite nod- can be quite frightening and may leave us wounded as we find ourselves challenged by a word from God which is outside our usual understanding of God's nature.

When we emerge, battered and bruised perhaps we will find ourselves richly blessed. And if we have even begun to take our scripture seriously the world will be blessed as we find ourselves thoroughly equipped for God's work.

PRAYERS

The Lord said to Joshua, "only be strong and very courageous..."

Faced with a turbulent world, where peace is such a rare commodity, where those countries that seem to be at peace still have strong currents of division running through them, where innocent people live in fear and those who are misled live in hatred, to talk of trust and confidence seems out of place.

We pray for the many who live in such countries or communities. That they may be inspired to seek justice and live in peace with all people,

God promised through the prophets "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers that they might not overwhelm you."

We think of the many facing the storms of life, whose confidence may be wavering, and for whom talk of trusting in God may be unhelpful.

We pray for those who struggle against poverty, against illness, against heartache. May they be enabled to find courage and live in dignity and peace,

Paul told the sailors as they faced the storm, "none of you will lose a hair from your heads".

We think of those in fear of their lives through persecution, famine or natural disasters; those who are imprisoned, either literally or through addiction or abusive relationships.

We pray that they may be enabled to know the healing and supporting love of God through the love and friendship of God's people.

Jesus told his disciples, "It is I; do not be afraid."

And we pray for ourselves and our church communities, asking that we may have the confidence to serve and witness in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Jesus said, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; ... power from on high."

We join with the churches of the Ipswich circuit, and all over the world, in the words of **the Lord's prayer**.

HYMN

God has given us a book full of stories,
Which was made for His people of old,
It begins with the tale of a garden,
And ends with the city of gold.

There are stories for parents and children,
For the old who are ready to rest,
But for all who can read them or listen,
The story of Jesus is best.

But the best is the story of Jesus,
Of the babe with the ox in the stall,
Of the song that was sung by the angels,
The most beautiful story of all.

For it tells how He came from the Father,
His far-away children to call,
To bring the lost sheep to their Shepherd-
The most beautiful story of all.

BLESSING

God of justice and peace, we commit ourselves afresh to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
May God's blessing be with us. Amen.

Opening prayers from Te Deum Laudamus STF 799 and Romans 7:19

Prayers of intercession based on a prayer in "Prayers for Worship" by local preacher Patricia Batstone.