



St Michael and all Angels

Sermon by Revd Linda Schwartz



Sunday 27 September 2020

READINGS

Genesis 28: 10-17; Psalm 103; Philippians 1: 21-30; John 1: 47-51

Our relationship with God

Hello to all the Saints at St Michael's, Bryanston. What a surprise it was for me when Moses called and offered me this virtual pulpit. The down side for me is that, whilst you can see me, I cannot see you. However, in my mind's eye I can see you sitting in your usual places in church – when going to church was usual – and when it will be again, will you go to your 'usual places'??!

My focus this morning is on the Genesis passage. As I was browsing virtual commentaries (I haven't unpacked all my books yet), I came across an examination of this story written back in 2014, but it fits so well with where we are now in our congregational lives. The story offers us an opportunity to reflect on what 'going back' church might be like as we look forward to next week from this Patronal Festival. It also offers us some reflection on where we are in our relationship with the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah and, after this story, Jacob and Rachel.

Jacob, as his name tells us, is a schemer and a usurper. He has not acted honourably in his most intimate relationships, those of his family. He stole his brother's birth-right and the blessing due to Esau. His grasping for status turns sour and he has to leave his mother, Rebekah, whom he loves, herself a schemer, and run for his life. He sets off for the place from where his ancestors Abraham and Sarah come, Haran. They were off on a journey following a call from YHWH to a promised land. Jacob is reversing that journey in a state of fear and without promise.

Night falls and he is forced to stop in a deserted place and sleep. His dream that night changes his life forever. God, up until then, hidden from Jacob, is revealed to him as an active presence in Jacob's life. The dream shows Jacob that God is active not only in HIS life, but in the life of the world, and of those in the world to come.

God appears, as is most often the case, not to the rulers, the powerful, the respected persons in communities, but to an ordinary man with a pretty dodgy life so far. Jacob is a refugee of his own making and he is on the run. And what is, for me, so astounding, is that God came and stood 'BESIDE' Jacob, lying there on the ground in what seems to be the middle of nowhere. Despite the vision of the dream of the angels going up and down and the idea that God is at the top of that ladder, God is BESIDE Jacob, not ABOVE him.

Jacob so badly wanted the blessing of his father and that desperate need caused huge familial sadness. And yet, it would seem that Jacob didn't need to grab that blessing, for here GOD is blessing him. But the blessing, as is always the case, is not just for Jacob, but for his descendants and all the families of the earth. A far wider blessing than the blessing he received from Isaac. The God who established a covenant with Abraham and Isaac, now establishes a covenant with Jacob. And part of the covenant is a guarantee of God's presence BESIDE them wherever they go.

Jacob, alone and cast out, is drawn onto a generational covenant with God and those who will come after Jacob will be part of that covenant, too. On waking in this bare place, Jacob now sees the place differently. It is now holy ground. The house of God is right there and Jacob uses a rock as a commemorative pillar to establish this place as the house of God, and promises to return to this place which later indeed becomes a shrine.

Then Jacob bargains a bit with God, or at least he sounds a little uncertain of the promise. A few verses after our reading for today ends, Jacob says, 'IF God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, THEN the Lord shall be my God, and this stone which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that You give me, I will surely give one tenth to you.'

We can and do encounter God anywhere, but there are places which are often significant in that we encounter God in special ways in them. St Michael's has a foundation stone, a reminder of the consecration of the ground and the building to the Glory of God. It is the 'stone of Jacob', if you will. How will the return to this sacred place be for you? Anything you as an individual might choose to do differently? Do you think you might have a renewed appreciation for the church and what it offers you? Have you missed being in church with those who were physically around you? Are there any changes that this time away may have suggested would be appropriate? Do you have thoughts of what church may mean to you now than it did before?

Remember that Jacob was drawn into a generational covenant with God. We do not, then, live only for and with this current generation of congregants here. We are here because of a previous generation. How will we leave it for the next generation?

God bless you.

Linda