

## ***Wrestling with God***

Each year at this time as our Year 12 students graduate and prepare to move beyond the walls of Loreto Normanhurst, I wonder where their path will take them – spiritually, religiously. They will each find their way and make their own choice. But one thing I do pray for them – and I always talk to my class about this – is that they may indeed engage in the conversation, the soul-searching, the argument, that they may listen to the whispers in their heart as much as to the voices around them, that they may never walk away disinterested – I pray that they may wrestle with God and that, dare I say, as the old ascetic in the story below says, that they may lose.

“Working up courage, I entered the cave and proceeded toward the voice. The ascetic was curled up on the ground. He had raised his head, and I was able in the half-light to make out his face as it gleamed in the depths of unutterable beatitude ... . I did not know what to say, where to begin... Finally, I gathered up courage. ‘Do you still wrestle with the devil Father Makarios?’ I asked him. ‘Not any longer, my child. I have grown old now, and he has grown old with me. He doesn’t have the strength. I wrestle with God.’ ‘With God!’ I exclaimed in astonishment. ‘And you hope to win?’ ‘I hope to lose, my child. My bones remain with me still, and they continue to resist’. ‘Yours is a hard life, Father. I too want to be saved. Is there no other way?’ ‘More agreeable?’ asked the ascetic, smiling compassionately. ‘More human, Father’. ‘One, only one’. ‘What is it?’ ‘Ascent. To climb a series of steps. From the full stomach to hunger, from the slaked throat to thirst, from joy to suffering; the devil sits at the summit of a comfortable life. Choose’. ‘I am still young. The world is nice. I have time to choose’. Reaching out with the five bones of his hand, the ascetic touched my knee and pushed me. ‘*Wake up, my child. Wake up before death wakes you up*’. (Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*.)

If you haven’t read *Report to Greco* I highly recommend it. It is an utterly absorbing account of a spiritual search and journey and is set in Greece, the author’s homeland. The extract above tells of Kazantzakis’ visit to Mount Athos, in the peninsula of Halkidiki, also known as the peninsula of Athos. It is a place completely dedicated to prayer and worship of God. The peninsula is 50 kilometres in length and 8 - 12 kilometres in width. Its highest point is like a huge cone, rising 2033 metres. It is also known as The Holy Mount and is the centre of Eastern Orthodox monasticism. The area is divided into twenty ‘cardinal areas’. Each area has a cardinal monastery and some other establishments around it, such as cottages, cloisters, cells and hermitages. The monks in each monastery live in community, having common prayer and liturgies and they do some form of work. The Holy Mount is self-governed – each monastery elects a superior for life and together they form the Holy Assembly which has legislative authority. It is here, on the Holy Mount, that Kazantzakis meets the monk whose transparency to God is the fruit of a lifetime of struggle and surrender. He speaks to Kazantzakis of something that is profoundly biblical - wrestling with God. It is also profoundly human. And the great moment of insight in this exchange is in the words, ‘I hope to lose!’



Wrestling with God is a biblical motif. Remember Moses, who tried in vain to get away from what he was called to do, to go to the pharaoh and ask for the Hebrews to be set free from slavery, by offering all sorts of reasons why someone else should be chosen – “I am a youth”, “I am not eloquent”, he said. But to no avail. He lost that struggle. And then there was Jonah who even set sail in the opposite direction in order to avoid going to Nineveh, to call the people there to repentance and conversion, and after ending up in the belly of a whale, was spat out upon the beach and had to admit his attempt to run away hadn’t worked. A powerful metaphor for struggle, surrender and re-birth. But let’s look at the story of another great biblical character, Jacob, for it has much to tell us about wrestling with God.

Jacob’s story is in the Book of Genesis. A little background to this text will set the scene for us. In the preceding chapters we learn something of the character of Jacob. He hasn’t been the best person. He has indulged in stealing - he stole Esau’s birthright - and deception, and we join him after he has sent his two wives, maids and children away: “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. Then he said: ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking’. But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’. So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob’. Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed’. 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved’.” (Genesis 32:24-32).

*Peniel* is Hebrew for ‘the face of God’. So here is Jacob, wrestling with God - this less than perfect character, face to face with God. And Jacob would not give up until he received a blessing. In other words, we might say that Jacob struggles with himself, and in himself, until in his honesty, he reaches a point where God overcomes his not-so-perfect self. He surrenders. The name change in this story is significant too. In biblical stories a name change signifies a change of identity, transformation, a new identity and a task intimately bound into God and of God. As he emerges from the struggle and is blessed, Jacob becomes Israel, one of the great patriarchs, the father of Israel, the people.

We can look at Jacob’s struggle with God on a number of levels: a moral struggle, a faith struggle, a psychological struggle, demanding his all. As Father Makarios said, our very bones resist! But as Jacob struggles he becomes more and more absorbed in the engagement, and ultimately the struggle continues because Jacob himself will not let go. This is a truly great story. Our God-engagement needs to be an all-consuming thing – it concerns nothing less than the very heart of who we are. It asks much more of us than a lukewarm and a ‘maybe’ response. As symbolised in Jacob’s name change, it ultimately leads to transformation, to a

newness of being, of seeing, of acting. 'Bless me', Jacob demanded. Put something of Yourself into me, is what he was asking of God.

The other story I want to look at is that of the prophet Jeremiah, and once again a little of the background to Jeremiah's prophet-hood will help us understand the man and his struggle. As with all the Hebrew prophets, we hear of Jeremiah's call, and we are told that God spoke to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah, that is, about 627 BCE. These were turbulent times. Josiah was the son of Menasseh, the king of the southern kingdom of Judah. Menasseh is portrayed as an evil king who allowed the idol worshipping practices of the neighbouring Assyrians into Judah. At that time there were three great powers in the region, Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. They were in conflict with each other and during these wars Judah managed to retain its independence. When Josiah succeeded Menasseh he reformed the practices of the ancient Jewish religion after finding a scroll, believed to have been the Book of Deuteronomy, hidden in the Temple, and he realised how far the practices had wandered from those described in this scroll. This was the year 622.

Later, in 587 BCE the kingdom of Judah lost its independence and became subject first to Egypt and then to Babylon, as Babylon became the dominant power in the region. The people of Judah were taken into exile in Babylon and the Temple was destroyed. This catastrophic event happened during the lifetime of Jeremiah. With the destruction of the Temple and exile, the very heart of Judaism was in danger.

So as we see, Jeremiah lived in stormy times and he was a complex character too. His name means 'Yah (God) exalts', and he was also known as 'the weeping prophet'. He lamented the tragedy that had befallen the Judaeans and he was also ultimately – and reluctantly – the savior of the Judaeans. With the Temple destroyed and nowhere to carry out the traditional Jewish ritual of temple sacrifice, Jeremiah insisted upon the primacy of the individual's relationship with God. Jeremiah also revealed the nation's sin, saying that the destruction of Judah and the exile were the result of the people abandoning God and turning to idol worship. He was not popular!

But what I want to reflect on is Jeremiah's struggle. Jeremiah did not welcome the call of God. He argued with God, and his protestations are reminiscent of those of Moses: he said he could not speak, he was only a youth. He resisted with all he had, but he too lost! And then, we have that utterly beautiful outpouring: "O Lord you have seduced me, and I have let myself be seduced; You have overpowered me and you have prevailed" (Jeremiah 20:7). Isn't that marvellous! Then, after bemoaning the fact that he has become a laughing stock and derided by those around him, cursing the day he was born, Jeremiah says, "If I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot".

Jeremiah is a larger than life character. Speaking out against the unholy practices of his day clearly wasn't comfortable or convenient and certainly didn't make him popular. And yet he was impelled to do so. In that deep-down, heart-of-us place, God's voice was heard. And it would not let him go! As Father Makarios said, his very bones resisted, and like Father Makarios' desire to lose, he did indeed lose that struggle!

Jacob's struggle, Jeremiah's struggle, our struggle. But this struggle with God is utterly integral to who we are. The most deeply human part of us is spiritual. Transcendence is at the heart of our human identity. Those great biblical characters certainly have a deeply human story to tell and they remind us that, above all, we need to engage with the struggle. To be truly human, we need to wrestle with God, for as St Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You". We are drawn to the 'more-than', and yet we often resist it too. As Kazantzakis said to Father Makarios, "the world is nice". In other words, things get in the way, our bones resist. I am reminded of Jesus' distinction that we be *in* the world but not *of* the world. And St Paul, in his letter to the Romans (12:2), urges us not to be conformed to the world. What Jesus is saying really is that, as the old monk said, we need to lose when we wrestle with God! When our restlessness is assuaged by what is fleeting or partial, we need to wrestle again. When we win, we need to passionately come back to the struggle and not give up until, like Jacob, we too are blessed.

Sometimes the struggle is played out in the small things – a word spoken or not, an ordinary, everyday choice, a yes or a no to some particular invitation. And sometimes it is writ large. At times it is the very question of doubt and faith, which certainly accompany each other throughout our lives. Doubt is part of faith, part of the wrestling with God, not its opposite.

The Dutch poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, in *The Man Watching*, paints this powerfully:

I can tell by the way the trees beat, after  
so many dull days, on my worried windowpanes  
that a storm is coming,  
and I hear the far-off fields say things  
I can't bear without a friend,  
I can't love without a sister.

The storm, the shifter of shapes, drives on  
across the woods and across time,  
and the world looks as if it had no age:  
the landscape like a line in the psalm book,  
is seriousness and weight and eternity.

What we choose to fight is so tiny!  
What fights us is so great!  
If only we would let ourselves be dominated  
as things do by some immense storm,  
we would become strong too, and not need names.

When we win it's with small things,  
and the triumph itself makes us small.  
What is extraordinary and eternal  
does not want to be bent by us.  
I mean the Angel who appeared  
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:  
when the wrestler's sinews

grew long like metal strings,  
he felt them under his fingers  
like chords of deep music.

Whoever was beaten by this Angel  
(who often simply declined the fight)  
went away proud and strengthened  
and great from that harsh hand,  
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.  
Winning does not tempt that man.  
This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,  
by constantly greater beings.

There is the most marvellous imagery in this poem. Rilke speaks of being 'kneaded', 'as if to change his shape'. Jeremiah used a similar image too. He spoke of the clay in the potter's hand, and how the potter reworked the clay to create the vessel he desired (Jeremiah 18). Be like the clay in the potter's hand. Let the angel win. As Rilke says, this is how we grow, by being defeated by greater beings. So let's welcome the struggle. When our conscience disturbs us, when we feel drawn to something more beautiful, more truthful, more morally demanding, more self-sacrificing, more self-giving, this is the 'Angel', this is 'the face of God', calling us to wrestle. And hopefully we will happily lose!

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