

**Sermon**

Sunday 19 July 2020

Lesson

Genesis 28: 10 – 19a

Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Israel, was the younger son of Isaac, and grandson of Abraham. Favoured by his father over the older twin brother Esau, Jacob left the land of Beersheba in search of a wife in the land of Haran. On his journey he came upon a certain place and ‘tarried there all night’. The sun had set; Jacob was in darkness.

In the Bible, many personal, intimate encounters with the Eternal occur in darkness: Abraham under the stars, Moses in the thick cloud, Jesus in the desert, Nicodemus at night with Jesus and, of course, the Resurrection of Jesus. *As spiritual stories*, darkness signifies the shutting out of distractions; stepping away from the concerns of the world and, briefly, entering the private, empty chamber of prayer. At its best, prayer is not words but awareness, not requests but resting. We are to still ourselves that we may begin to appreciate the stillness of God; quieten our souls that we may hear the sweet silence of God. Jacob journeyed away from his father Isaac into ‘a desert place’, an opportunity to be alone - and there he encountered God in a dream.



With stones for a pillow,  
he slept and dreamt. In  
the King James Version,  
we read that Jacob saw ‘a  
ladder set up on the earth,  
and the top of it reached to  
heaven: and behold the  
angels of God ascending

and descending on it’. In the Jewish tradition, there is a story told of a Roman noblewoman who asked a rabbi what God had been doing since completing the creation of the world. The rabbi replied:

The Holy One, blessed be he, has been busy making ladders, having this one ascend and that one descend, lifting this one up and putting that one down.

In other words, since the ‘completion’ of creation, after the seventh day and every day since, God has been appearing in dreams, entering souls where invited, and cooperatively shaping the history of humanity.

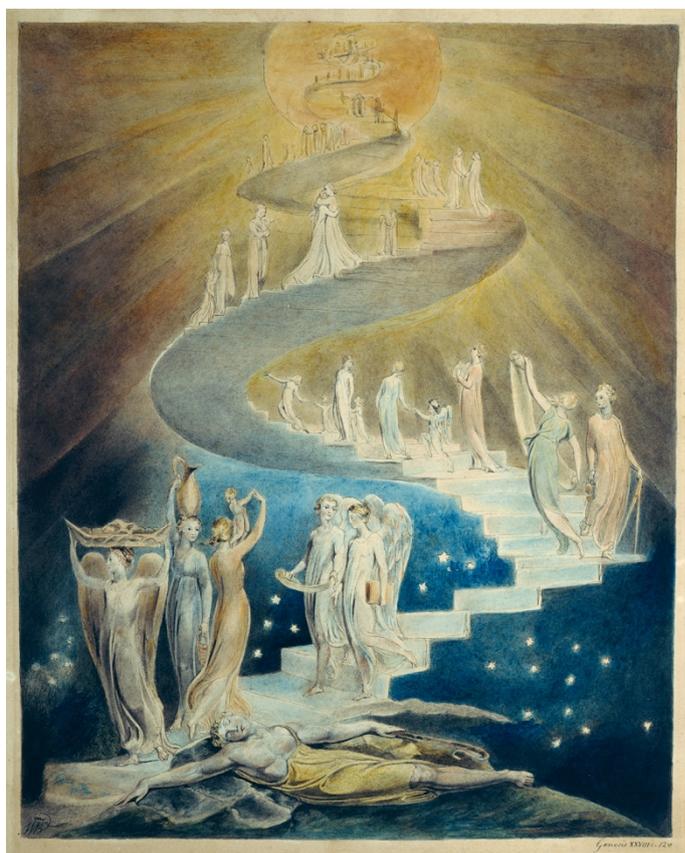
In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder or stairway. Some scholars suggest that there is a linguistic connection in Hebrew between ladder and peace. Ladder or ‘sulam’ is similar to peace or ‘shalom’. Shalom means peace or completeness. Encounter with God, our union with heaven, is surely our path to fulfilment and completeness. For a

moment, in a mystical vision, Jacob felt himself to be at one with the Sublime, the creator of heaven and earth.

What of your life's experience? Have there been moments in which you have felt strangely at peace: on a beach, in a park, by a river, in a country church or city cathedral? Our spiritual journey will be enriched when we are alert to moments of stillness and, albeit fleetingly, stop ourselves just long enough to appreciate them. Under the night sky, in a moment of darkness and spiritual emptiness, place and time became a sacrament for Jacob: 'Surely the LORD is in *this* place....*this* is the house of God and *this* is the gate of heaven'. In his encounter with God, Jacob did not speak: he watched and listened.

Having woken from his dream, having encountered God in the seclusion of night, Jacob 'rose up early in the morning'. I wonder if first century Jewish Christians would hear the Jacob story in the account of the Resurrection. In the Gospels, we are told that Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Salome, Peter and the Beloved Disciple went to the tomb very early in the morning. Once there, they too 'discovered' the LORD, now in *this* place: *this* is the house of God and *this* is the gate of heaven. Elsewhere in the Jacob story, Jacob rolled away a stone from a well so that the sheep could drink. Once the stone was away, the sheep tasted life-giving water.

In the Jewish tradition, rabbis interpreted the Jacob dream as the people of Israel at the temple in Jerusalem: the ladder was the stairway into the temple, the house of God, and the angels were the priests ascending and descending. The fragrance of the temple's incense was lifted up to heaven. God was in *this* place. In another story, rabbis understood the symbol of the ladder as Moses climbing Mount Sinai to be with God in the cloud, entering the Mystery. The mountain was alight with fire: God was in *this* place.



It is instructive for Christians to see that the Jewish tradition interprets Scripture imaginatively. Jesus was a Jew and the Gospels were first written for Jewish Christians in the Jewish world. For Christians, Jesus is *the* point of encounter with the Holy. Of course, we can be aware of the Sacred through nature

or, indeed, we may hear the Divine in the stories of other faith traditions but, for us, there is a beautiful, tender revelation of God in the mystic from Nazareth. He is our 'thin place': God is in *this* place.

In the Early Church, during the first five centuries of Christian history, the Church Fathers interpreted the story of Jacob's ladder as the soul climbing from earth to heaven. Origen saw two ladders: the soul increasing or rising in virtue and, at death, the soul travelling to heaven, climbing towards the light of God. Gregory of Nyssa believed that Moses climbed Jacob's ladder to reach 'the tabernacle not made with hands'; a story of union with the Divine. Christian writers understood the story in Genesis as *our* spiritual journey: yours and mine.

Jacob's ladder is within each of us. It is our journey: God is in *this* place; your soul and mine. In *Paraphrase 2* of the Scottish Paraphrases, to Haydn's tune *Salzburg*, we sing of the Jacob story. Written by Philip Doddridge, the hymn was entitled *Jacob's Vow* and the original first line was, 'O God of Jacob, by whose hand'. On Monday last I attended a funeral service of a retired minister who had been a good friend. We listened to a recording of this hymn, a poem which powerfully brings to the fore our life's spiritual pilgrimage:

O God of Bethel! by whose hand  
thy people still are fed,  
who through this weary pilgrimage  
hast all our fathers led:

Our vows, our prayers, we now present  
before thy throne of grace:  
God of our fathers! be the God  
of their succeeding race.

Through each perplexing path of life  
our wandering footsteps guide;  
give us each day our daily bread,  
and raiment fit provide.

O spread thy covering wings around,  
till all our wanderings cease,  
and at our Father's loved abode  
our souls arrive in peace.

Such blessings from thy gracious hand  
our humble prayers implore;  
and thou shalt be our chosen God,  
and portion evermore.

For a moment, let the distractions of the world fall away. See the ladder within you; feel the Presence, shalom and completeness. Let yourself be lifted. 'Portion' means the land, the space; the place on which we live with God, share with God and are one with God.

Amen.