

Winchester, Eastleigh and Romsey Circuit
SERVICE AT HOME: Sunday 23 July 2023
Prepared by Graham Hepburn

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

Welcome to this week's service at home.

In our lesson today, we read (Gen 28 verse 16) -
When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought,
"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware
of it."

To begin, reflect on times and places when and
where you have been surprised to feel the presence
of God, and give thanks for them.

Listen, read, pray or sing along

We begin with the hymn 'Deep in the shadows of
the past' (StF 463)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fBnZ0C8Tj4>

Deep in the shadows of the past,
Far out from settled lands,
Some nomads travelled with their God
Across the desert sands.
The dawn of hope for humankind
Was glimpsed by them alone—
A promise calling them ahead,
A future yet unknown.

While others bowed to changeless gods,
They met a mystery:
God with an uncompleted name,
'I am what I will be';
And by their tents, around their fires,
In story, song and law,
They praised, remembered, handed on
A past that promised more.

From Exodus to Pentecost
The promise changed and grew,
While some, remembering the past,
Recorded what they knew.
And some, in letters or laments,
In prophecy and praise,
Recovered, held, and re-expressed

New hope for changing days.
For all the writings that survived,
For leaders, long ago,
Who sifted, chose, and then preserved
The Bible that we know,
Give thanks, and find its promise yet
Our comfort, strength, and call,
The working model for our faith,
Alive with hope for all.

Brian Wren (b 1936)

Prayers of Praise and Confession

Our opening prayers today are taken from 'Responding
to the Gospel', the 2020 Methodist Prayer Handbook.

Prayer of Praise, Psalm 148 v1-6 (page 10)

Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
 praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
 praise him, all his host!
Praise him, sun and moon;
 praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
 and you waters, above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.
He established them for ever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Amen.

Prayer of Praise, (page 5, Geoff Floyd)

Loving Lord, beyond all time, we praise and worship
you.
You are the one who came, who comes, and who is
to come.
You came to us in Jesus, revealing your love and
compassion, your power, your truth and your
nature, which wholly and ceaselessly give of
yourself.
You come to us in the presence of the Holy Spirit,
leading us to Jesus, empowering us for your service,
granting us your precious gifts, producing delightful
fruit, keeping us in your presence and being ever
faithful to us.
You will come to us at the end of the ages, at the
full realisation of your kingdom, when your work in

us will be complete and when love will eternally reign.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we worship you.

Amen.

Prayer of Confession,

(page 6, Susan Anderson)

Loving God, when we have thought of ourselves above all else, forgive us.

When we have failed to listen to your word as we should have done, forgive us.

When we have lacked the courage to serve knowing we have no reason to fear, forgive us.

When we have turned away from your sacrifice and suffering, forgive us.

When we have been too easily distracted and seem far away from you, forgive us.

As we come before you today, inadequate and flailing, we ask for your grace and understanding.

You gave us your Son, the most precious gift of all; when we have not served you as we should have, help us to take courage from his word,

We lay before you all that we are truly sorry for and ask for you salvation, merciful and just God.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be Holy,

your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever.

Amen.

Bible Reading, Jacob's Dream at Bethel, Genesis 28 v10-19a

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to

heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, [*Bethel means house of God*] though the city used to be called Luz.

Reflection

I remember studying Jacob during my local preacher studies, on my journey to becoming a fully accredited Methodist local preacher. We discussed the comment that, 'Jacob was a fifty-one percent believer,' meaning that he had just enough faith to see him through all his travails.

Jacob is someone capable of deceit, even of his own family, someone with an eye for the main chance for his own gain at the expense of others. He now realises that his actions have rebounded on him. He is haunted by his feelings of guilt and shame for his past. His hopes of inheriting God's promises to his forefathers appear to have disappeared and he is thoroughly depressed. Jacob is running away from his problems

- a brother who he has cheated, and who he thinks is out for revenge
- he is running away from his responsibilities to God, as the descendant of Abraham and Isaac

It is at this moment that God's assurance comes to Jacob. Perhaps this is a conversion experience for Jacob, the first time he has had such a feeling of awe at the presence of God. It happens in the night, but it doesn't happen overnight. As we read on in the story, there are many more twists and turns to come. Whatever he had done, this shows that Jacob was still close enough to God to have instances of great insight, like this dream.

The episodes in the Jacob may be extreme, but they stand as a reminder to us all of the conflict in ourselves between the good and bad sides of our characters.

God is not remote and aloof from his world. A stairway joins heaven and earth which enables two way communication. The realms of the spiritual and the physical are not separate but are linked by God. The stairway is not a one-way street, it is a highway for two way traffic between God and ourselves. It is not an escalator (I wonder how the writer of Genesis would have described that!) so it involves the effort of walking up the stairway for us, and of walking down, for God and his angels.

In Jacob's dream, the stairway is between heaven and where he is. For Jacob, that is between heaven and Bethel. For us, it is between heaven and where we live. For Francis Thompson in the following poem, it is between heaven and Charing Cross.

God is not limited or confined. Those of Jacob's time thought that God was Lord only of certain regions of the earth; now Jacob discovered that wherever he went, God was present.

God should be approached with reverence and holy fear. However intimate our relationship with God, we can never regard him as an equal. Jacob's first act on realising the presence of God, was to worship him, and to name the place Bethel, meaning 'house of God'. It is only through our worship that we may truly know God.

How much faith do we have? Is it more or less than fifty-one percent?

Listen, read, pray

Our next item is a poem based around the story of Jacob's dream,

'In No Strange Land, (The Kingdom of God)' by Francis Thompson, (1859-1907)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZRJVNM3hul>

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!—
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places;—
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry,—clinging to Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Genesareth, but Thames!

Prayers of intercession

Lord God, we pray for our world and its people.
So many different cultures, colours, languages
— but we are all your children, all special in our
own right.

Whatever our gender, race, colour or creed, we all
belong to you.

We all need your love.

We pray that we might learn to live in harmony with each other, to recognise that even someone halfway around the world is still our neighbour in your sight. Far or near, we all belong to you.

We all need your love.

With today's technology we have access to news from afar, almost before it happens. Help us not to become blasé about the situations we see, but to pray and care faithfully for all concerned. In war or peace, we all belong to you.

We all need your love.

We pray for those near and dear to us: protect them, wrap them in your loving arms, and in sorrow and in joy, be with them.

Near or far, we all belong to you.

We all need your love.

Amen.

(c Roots on the Web)

Offering and Prayer of Dedication

We dedicate our weekly offering, however it is made, praying for those who will prayerfully decide how it is spent within our Circuit and beyond.

Gracious God, accept these gifts, our money, and all our offerings, and with them our lives, to be used in mission and service through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Listen, read, pray or sing along

Our final hymn is 'As Jacob with travel was weary one day', (Hymns and Psalms 444)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ECU1pom5_c

As Jacob with travel was weary one day,
At night on a stone for a pillow he lay,
He was in a vision a ladder so high,
That its foot was on Earth, and its top in the sky.

[Chorus]

Hallelujah to Jesus, who died on the tree,
And hath rais'd up a ladder of mercy for me,
And hath rais'd up a ladder of mercy for me.

This ladder is long, it is strong and well-made,
Has stood hundreds of years and is not yet decayed;
Many millions have climbed it and reached Zion's hill,
And thousands by faith are climbing it still.

[Chorus]

Come let us ascend; all may climb it who will,
For the Angels of Jacob are guarding it still:
And remember each step, that by faith we pass o'er,
Some Prophet or Martyr hath trod it before.

[Chorus]

And when we arrive at the haven of rest
We shall hear the great words "Come up hither,
ye blest,
Here are regions of light, here are mansions of bliss:"

O who would not climb such a ladder as this?

[Chorus]

Anonymous(18th Century)

Sending and blessing

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and for evermore.

Amen.

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