

I'd like you to hold in your mind three fight- related images which are presented to us in today's readings. First from today's Old Testament reading the night time wrestling even between Jacob and the un-named man. Second, the picture from this morning's Gospel reading of the importunate widow addressing the unjust judge, and then her punching him in the eye. And third that picture which this morning's Old Testament reading gives us of Jacob, newly named Israel, holding his hip in pain, limping away from the scene at Penuel.

Let's just deal with the image of the angry old lady. It's part of the proof that Jesus has the most extraordinary sense of humour. The image of an uncaring corrupt judge is almost an archetypal one. There is no major significance in the story of the judge being unjust other than to make the point that if an unjust judge can eventually give justice, so much more will God himself. The amusing part of the story is the persistence of the widow. The Greek for the verb *to trouble* is actually most often used in New Testament times for *to punch somebody in the eye*. The judge was not worrying about having his evening meal interrupted or not be able to have a snooze after lunch, he was worried that her hectoring would eventually lead to physical violence, so persistent was she. It's a very important story for all of us of the character of Christian perseverance, of resilience, of the need to keep faith because God himself is not unjust but faithful and constantly present.

Let's now look at the night time encounter between Jacob and the unknown character at Penuel.

Let us remember the extended narrative Esau and his twin brother Jacob, of which this is a part.

There is a reading of it which I have long been fascinated by which is informed by depth psychology, most particularly the work of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung who was a student of Sigmund Freud. It is this lens I would like to bring to bear on this story.

Esau and Jacob are twins. Twins in psychological terms represent two sides of the same coin, two halves which make up one psychological whole; this is important to bear in mind in understanding the Jacob narrative. You will remember that Esau was born first. He was his father Isaac's favourite son. Jacob, his younger brother, was a fine but slippery person, his mother's favourite, and as his name implies he was a trickster, and capable of deceit.

The key story in the narrative is of course Jacob's connivance with his mother to steal his older brother's birthright. After which Jacob leaves home, bound for his uncle Laban's house.

On the way, in the wilderness, he has the first of several extraordinary visions or dreams at Bethel. I don't know if you know the exterior of Bath Abbey but it's fine west window and either side of it are ladders with Angels climbing up and down. This Somerset scene in stone depicts the story of Jacob's ladder. Jacob, in this moment, sees from a psychological perspective that which has been divided in his life and his brother's life. At the same time he is given a vision of the unity between heaven and earth. By this division between Jacob and Esau earth and heaven in a sense have been divided but they are brought together in this vision. It will take the outworking of the whole narrative for this vision to become a reality.

At Bethel the Lord promises Jacob that he will be the father of a great nation, and that place is remembered and anointed as special and holy, "Surely the Lord is in this place this is none

other than the gate of heaven," says Jacob. Words you will all recognise, inscribed as they are above the inner door of this church.

And so, Jacob sojourns a long way from home. It takes in 14 years to marry the wife of his choice, his cousin Rachel, and before her Leah, her sister, and all those years later he arrives into today's scene with his 11 children.

Angels appear to him at Bethel, and they play a continuing part in the story.

1. When Jacob escapes surreptitiously from Laban, his father-in-law's house, he is told to depart by one.
2. And after he is finally out of Laban's clutches we are told "Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him, and when Jacob saw them he said "This is God's army!"

Now we have what could be the long-awaited showdown, beautifully and slowly narrated. The meeting that will then transpire with his older and disinherited twin; it is not just the meeting of his sibling rival, but it is the confrontation with his psychological opposite. The neglected, alienated, rejected other half of himself. Despite Jacob's enormous success he is terrified at the prospect of the encounter.

He pitches camp and as night falls so he does battle with an extraordinary and un-named presence.

We know from the next chapter (Gen 33) when the brothers meet in the clear light of day, and Esau could not be more the model of grace and forgiving fraternal love, that the night time encounter as well as being a struggle with God was bound up with the forthcoming meeting with Esau. Jacob says to his twin "To see your face is like seeing the face of God." (33:10)

Penueel is a confrontation with Jacob's real self. It is brought about because of Jacob's over-inflated and most dangerous ego. It cast a shadow so dark that it had withheld from Jacob a grasp of who he really was, and might become.

What is very interesting is that Jacob prevails; he holds his own.

There are strong parallels between this story and that of Cain and Abel: brothers whose rivalry became murderous. There are shades of murder lurking strongly in this narrative. Before the meeting Jacob thinks of every form of appeasement possible, and there is a complex play on words in the Hebrew in the section just before today's passage, which is all about the fear of the face to face encounter that will come. The almost deliberate melding of the stories of Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau add to the psychological intensity. Carl Jung says "Jacob wrestled with the angel and came away with a dislocated hip, but the struggle prevented a murder." Depth Psychology suggests that the wrong done in and to the Shadow leads to revenge by the Self against the Ego.

This is dense psychobabble.

In short this is Jacob's psyche's attempt at resolution of the deepest injustice.

His alienation of Esau, his Shadow, is not psychologically sustainable. With the Shadow at bay, the Ego runs riot and will commit worse misdemeanours – even murder.

The Self, the very deepest and truest part of who we are, the potentially most holy part of us, is only whole when the Shadow is integrated and held close.

This is reminiscent of Prospero's words towards the end of *The Tempest*, when he speaks of his creature Caliban, "This thing of darkness, I call mine." In this night-time encounter, the Ego is forced to embrace the Shadow and thereby make Self whole. Jacob's Shadow, who may or may not be Esau or Cain, or God, or an Angel, strives with the brute force of an Ego beyond all egos, Jacob, but fascinatingly does not prevail.

We might think that that the injustice would be reversed, or compensated for - the Shadow, Esau vindicated in some way. But the Ego, Jacob is not vanquished, in the encounter, Jacob wins.

He does not get off though.

First he is renamed. This bruising encounter brings about a new birth, a new name, a new task. Jacob the trickster becomes Israel, the father of a nation. This is a vocation not a victory.

The Shadow can no longer be forgotten. Esau, the stranger, will be his brother once again, and when they meet they will hold each other close, not in combat but in tears of reconciliation.

And as we pictured when we began, as the sun rises, Jacob holds his hip; he has been wounded, he is indelibly marked by this showdown, which was ultimately with himself.

What does he do at the end of this? He asks for a blessing. But has he not had one, the better one already? No what he has was from his father, now he is blessed by God himself.

Yes, in a sense God has yielded to him, but when Jacob asks his assailant his name, it is not revealed. It is Jacob who instead who gets a new name. As Israel is renamed, so Israel comes into being by being victimised by God. The encounter is crippling. Jacob-Israel has penetrated the mystery of God, like none before him, but his prevailing is also his defeat.

In this collection of fisticuff readings, the winner, is really the loser, the judge, is really the judged, and all the points go to the one who can throw the best right hook or as the Psychoanalysts might say:

The one who can integrate the Shadow with the Self and thereby complete the Ego.

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