

Sermon – Sunday 14th July – 6 pm

There are times, often during Morning Prayer, when there is a particularly long Old Testament lesson, perhaps describing cruel violence, or perhaps going into the finest detail about a ritual sacrifice, that I find myself wondering whether the scriptures can really speak to us today. And then there are other times – and this evening is one of them – that I am reminded that really so much of human experience is contained within the pages of scripture.

Just think for a moment about the character of David. It is in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Chronicles that we hear about David's life, including so many iconic stories. We meet him as a young shepherd who gains the favour of Saul, and defeats the giant Goliath; we hear of his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan; of his anointing as King after Saul's death; of his desire for Bathsheba, which leads to arranging the death of her husband, Uriah; of his successes and failures as King. Whether or not we believe the finer details of each of the stories, we find deep truth in the character of David. He is considered one of Israel's better kings, yet there is no doubting his humanity. He demonstrates gifts for friendship, leadership, wisdom and faith, yet he can be an opportunist, devious and driven by personal desire.

This evening's Old Testament lesson is about Jacob, a similarly paradoxical figure. It is the book of Genesis that tells us about his life. He is the son of Isaac and Rebekah and twin brother of Esau. The apple of his mother's eye, he cheats his brother out of his birthright. God-fearing, he dreams of a ladder connecting heaven and earth with angels going up and down. In this evening's reading we hear about his attempted reconciliation with his brother, preceded by a night wrestling with God. Jacob will go on to have twelve sons, including his favourite, Joseph. Once again, Jacob is a character who reminds us of our humanity. He is a faithful man, yet we see in him sibling rivalry as well as favouritism when it comes to his own children.

If we think about ourselves, about our own life stories, we can surely recognise some of the emotional landscape that we see in characters like David and Jacob. Faith is a part of our lives, like theirs, and we can perhaps recognise how our relationship with God has changed over time. For some of us there may have been a conversion experience; for most of us there will have been some times of deeper commitment and others where God has felt more distant. We may recognise too our times of wrestling with God in our own ways. In terms of our relationships, we will know those times when we have felt loving and generous towards others and those times when we have struggled with feelings of jealousy and dislike. Perhaps we can even recognise actions that we are less than proud of, as well as times when we feel we did the right thing.

What is so encouraging about some of the characters of the Old Testament is not that they are particularly exemplary, nor that they are blameless or without fault. What is encouraging is that they are just like us – and yet God continues to be with them and to work through them. In the sweep of each character's life we see the range of human experience, the best and the worst. And God continues to be God. God continues to believe that through human beings, flawed though we are, extraordinary things can happen. God continues to believe that we are not defined by our worst moments, but by the possibility that we can always turn back to God. And God is there throughout.

I've been reading a book about ministry which seeks to draw on real experiences and the challenges presented by unrealistic expectations. But this is not unique to priests. We can all expect a lot of ourselves and others, and experience disappointment and disillusion when we and others fall short.

What the scriptures remind us is that God continues to be there, and continues to believe in what we are capable of. And we are called to be honest about what's difficult, and keep turning again to God. To pick ourselves up from our mistakes and remind ourselves that something else is possible. Not because we are perfect, but because God's love is.

Amen