

**Sunday 6th August 2023**

**Ordinary 18 | Proper 13**

**The Rev’d Andy Braunston**

**Call to Worship**

Come and wrestle with the Ancient of Days;

feel God’s presence in your minds and bodies,

knowing that you will be forever changed by the struggle.

**We long to see God, face to face.**

Come and struggle with the Risen Lord,

who will heal your wounds, and never let you go –

even when you struggle with Him throughout the night.

**We long to see God, face to face.**

Come and grapple with the Holy Spirit who marks us His own,

who blesses us with all good gifts

and whose presence lights our way even in the dark of night.

**We long to see God, face to face.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession, and Forgiveness**

O Most High,

we bring You our praise this day,

we see You face to face:

in the world around us; in flower and tree;

in wind and wave; in sunshine and rain;

in those we know and love, in friend and stranger.

Jesus, Enfleshed Word,

we bring You ourselves this day,

longing to see You face to face,

we cling to You knowing You hold us fast.

Yet we know, that all too often, we try to let go of You,

we struggle against what is good for us,

turning our back on You,

and looking away from Your face.

But Your arms are always held wide open in welcome.

Holy Spirit, Abiding Presence,

we feel You amongst us this day,

helping us to see Your face,

enabling us to love even when love is a struggle,

helping us to love ourselves when we’d prefer to hate,

inspire us, Holy One, to return to You,

to hold fast to love and justice,

and wait continually for You,

even as we struggle. Amen.

**Words of Assurance**

Like a mother eagle who tends her young;

like a father who runs to welcome home the estranged;

like a rock upon which we stand,

God is loving and faithful, and forgives all our sins.

God loves and forgives you,

so have the strength to love and forgive yourself. Amen

**Prayer of Illumination**

Dear Lord,

often we struggle to hear Your voice,

in the competing sounds of our world.

Speak to us now as we hear Your word read and proclaimed,

that as we listen You will inspire us

that as we struggle You will strengthen us,

and as we respond You will lead us. Amen.

**Readings**

*Genesis 32: 22-31* | *Hosea 12: 2 – 6*

**All Age Activity**

Ask if anyone has struggled to forgive someone who has hurt them or has struggled to seek forgiveness when they’ve been hurt? What did it feel like to either forgive or seek forgiveness? Was there fear? Was it difficult? Today we’ve heard about the struggle that Jacob had; he’d always been fighting his brother, Esau. Even in the womb they struggled. Jacob cheated Esau out of his inheritance and they’d been apart for 20 years. Today Jacob comes back to Esau’s land and sends rich gifts; Esau sends 400 men to meet Jacob – what might have been happening there? (Maybe Esau was sending the men to fight – Jacob thought so and sent half his people away so they could escape.) Then, once they’d gone a stranger came and wrestled with Jacob – the stranger was God. Just as we struggle to forgive, or seek forgiveness, Jacob struggled with God – the struggle changed him, just as forgiving or seeking forgiveness can change us.

**Sermon Notes**

*Genesis*

This story is set against the background of a family feud. Jacob and his brother Esau had a troubled relationship. They struggled even in their mother’s womb. Jacob deceived their father, Isaac, to get his blessing and inheritance thus denying it to his brother Esau. Jacob struggled throughout his life – he had to strive with his father-in-law Laban in order to marry Rachel and, in today’s reading he strove against an unknown traveller against a background of family conflict and tentative reunion. Jacob had been away for 20 years in Mesopotamia; the last time we saw Esau and Jacob together in the text Esau was plotting to kill his brother as he’d been cheated out of his inheritance. Now Esau was rich and powerful as was Jacob – he’d done well with his years away. When Jacob left, all those years beforehand, he’d negotiated a deal to come back in safety but that agreement was about to be put to the test. Jacob sent messengers ahead with extravagant gifts to Esau in order to test the waters. The messengers returned and told Jacob that his brother is coming to meet him – but with 400 men. Quite an honour guard and, given their family dynamic, Jacob was anxious. Assuming his brother was hostile Jacob divided his family and retainers into two groups so that if attacked one half could flee to safety. Jacob pleaded with God for safety and trusted in both his prayers and his preparations. Half his family, stock, and retainers withdrew. Night came and then this strange scene happened where Jacob wrestled through the night with a stranger. The wrestling continued and neither would let the other go; eventually it’s clear that Jacob was wrestling with God – the refusal to tell Jacob His name is the clue. (In the Old Testament God does not reveal His name simply telling Moses “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be”. To let another know one’s name is to allow another to have power over you and God doesn’t play that game.) The stranger changed Jacob’s name to Israel just as God changed Abram’s name to Abraham. The encounter left Jacob forever wounded and the story continued with a reconciliation with Esau.

*Hosea*

This idea of wrestling with God is one that has entertained the imaginations of Jews and Christians for millennia. Our reading from Hosea is an early Jewish attempt to interpret the story. Hosea ministered 800 years before Jesus in the northern Jewish kingdom of Israel. He’s a bit of a prophet of doom foretelling destruction if the people don’t turn back to God. In today’s passage Hosea identifies the Jewish people, Israel, with Jacob – whose name was changed into Israel. Just as Jacob fought in the womb with his brother and with God as an adult, so the people have rebelled against God and fight against Him. Just as Jacob prevailed against God so we can prevail by obeying God by holding fast to love and justice.

*Later Interpretations*

Luther saw this story as one of wrestling with God – not surprising given the troubles Luther had with the Church in his attempts to reform it. Calvin saw the story as a vision for all of us about the wrestling we have to do in life – the Lord, he said, exercises us with various kinds of conflicts. God tries our strength through these struggles. Calvin thought that it was, like Jacob, with God’s own self that we wrestle in order to be tested and strengthened. Charles Wesley, in his hymn *Come O Thou Traveller Unknown* saw the figure that Jacob wrestled with as Christ. Wesley captures Jacob’s desire to know God “The secret of Thy love unfold; wrestling, I will not let Thee go, till I Thy name, Thy nature know.”

*So What?*

We know all too well that the life of faith, like families, is hard! Just as we struggle with families, learning to keep the peace, find ways to challenge and disagree without wounding deep bonds, finding ways to be ourselves against another’s wrath we also struggle with faith. We can see throughout our history of the struggle to follow Christ can be difficult; whether that’s Christians in Roman arenas or meeting in secret in Iran, North Korea, or Saudi Arabia now. But for us it’s hard to – not has hard as where the Church is persecuted – but we still do a lot of wrestling and some wounding. Sometimes that struggle is to be true to ourselves and our faith:

* we may struggle to keep our ourselves intellectually honest when the Biblical message appears to condemn, wound, and destroy yet we long to believe God is love and light.
* we may struggle to be faithful and able to speak of God in a public space where we’re seen, at best, as quaint or, at worse, as dangerous.
* we may struggle to continue to keep the commitment we’ve made to follow Christ when it’s easier to wander off the path.
* we may struggle to find the new God given opportunities as all the old privileges of the Church are forgotten, stripped away or seen as wrong in contemporary society.
* we may struggle in our efforts to live in harmony with creation in a world which wishes to green wash its polluting habits.

Calvin may have been right when he wrote that in all these struggles it’s with God we fight as we’re taught to be better disciples. We’ve no idea if we will, like Jacob, have the energy to fight throughout the night. We do know that in our struggles we will be changed, liked Jacob was; we may even be wounded. We do know that in our wrestling, and in our woundedness, we will be blessed, just as Jacob was. As Wesley wrote, we realise that, in our struggles, we see the one he described as: *’Tis Love! ’tis Love! Thou diedst for me, I hear Thy whisper in my heart; the morning breaks, the shadows flee: pure, universal Love Thou art; to me, to all Thy mercies move; Thy nature and Thy name is Love.*

**Affirmation of Faith**

**We believe in God.**

**Despite His silence and His secrets we believe that He lives.**

**Despite evil and suffering we believe that He made the world**

**so that all would be happy in life.**

**Despite the limitations of our reason and the revolts of our hearts, we believe in God.**

**We believe in Jesus Christ.**

**Despite the centuries which separate us from the time when he came to earth,**

**we believe in His word.**

**Despite our incomprehension and our doubt, we believe in His resurrection.**

**Despite his weakness and poverty, we believe in His reign.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit.**

**Despite appearances we believe He guides the Church;**

**despite death we believe in eternal life;**

**despite ignorance and disbelief,**

**we believe that the Kingdom of God is promised to all. Amen.**

*from the Reformed Church of France, translated by Andy Braunston*

**Intercessions**

O Most High,

we pray today for those who struggle against

the earthly powers and principalities that seek to rule our world;

for those who seek peace in a world at war,

for those who seek love in a world of hate,

for those who seek justice in a world of evil;

give strength, encouragement and the ability to hold on until the dawn comes.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy…**hear our prayer**.

O Enfleshed Word,

we pray today for those who struggle against,

the forces of the market which seek to enslave and impoverish;

we pray for those who can’t pay their bills,

for those for whom work doesn’t pay,

for developing countries never out of debt to the new empires of capital,

for those who sell not just their labour but their bodies this day;

give strength, encouragement and the ability to hold on

until the dawn comes.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy…**hear our prayer**.

O Abiding Spirit

we pray today for those who struggle with ill health,

in mind, body or spirit;

for those struggling with pain waiting to see a doctor,

for those struggling to make the NHS work better,

for those with mental health problems for whom there seems no hope;

give strength, encouragement and the ability to hold on

until the dawn comes.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy…**hear our prayer**.

O Trinity of Love,

we remember before You all we love and worry about….

and all the places and people we’ve mentioned today,

give us the strength, encouragement and ability to hold on,

that we may make a difference as the dawn comes.

*pause*

We join all our prayers together as we pray…Our Father…

**Offertory**

We struggle with much in life – money is a constant struggle for us all. For some we struggle as we don’t have enough; with rising inflation which pay, pensions and benefits struggle to keep pace with we wrestle with bills and bank balances. For some we struggle as we have more than enough but find giving hard; saving for a rainy day can soon become selfish if we’re not careful. Giving is the antidote to greed; giving is good for us and for those to whom we give. Giving is a key measure of our discipleship; we give through time, talents and treasure and now we give thanks for all that God has given us.

O God of struggle,

bless, we ask, our gifts of time, talent and treasure,

that the little we return to you,

may make a difference in our world,

as we cling on ‘til dawn. Amen.

**Communion**

Be still my soul, for God is on your side. Bear patiently your crosses of grief and pain.

Be still and remember God will guide you through both good times and bad;

let nothing shake your confidence for God is here at this table.

Here we meet with our praise and our pain.

Here we meet with our triumphs and our tragedies.

Here we meet with our memories and our hopes.

Here we meet with the Risen Lord who wipes away our tears.

Here we show forth Calvary through bread broken and wine outpoured.

Here we eat and drink as Jesus taught

and through these earthly gifts receive heavenly food.

Here, through bread and wine we are nourished and grow in grace.

Here we offer ourselves again as living sacrifices;

here we rejoice that Jesus will come again in glory.

Here we remember all that God has done for us,

and sing again, with angels and archangels, in praise of God’s most holy name:

*[You may wish to say the Holy, Holy, Holy, or use a sung version. I suggest using Brian Doerkson’s Holy is the Lord with its haunting melody. You can hear it here* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuX6BtROfRk*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuX6BtROfRk) *]*

Holy are you, O Most High, and holy is Your name.

From before ages You called us to be Your people,

to love and follow You,

to wrestle and struggle with You,

to praise and imitate You.

In the fullness of time You became one of us,

that You might know our pain and woundedness,

our joys and sorrows, our struggles and yearnings.

Jesus preached the good news to the poor,

released captives, lifted up the oppressed,

and enabled his followers to see the world as it really is.

Yet those who did not wish to see struck him down.

Those who did not wish to release captives locked him up.

Those who resisted the poor enriched themselves.

Yet You, O God, raised Jesus on high;

from the struggle of the Cross You brought forth joy and victory,

and allow all the broken victims to be freed.

We remember night when Jesus wrestled with Your will,

and when, amongst friends, he took bread, blessed it,

gave it to the others and said:

“Take this all of you and eat it, for this is my body which will be broken for you.”

Later, after Supper, he took the cup of wine, blessed it, gave it to the others and said:

“Take this all of you and drink from it; this is the cup of my blood,

the blood of the new and everlasting covenant,

it will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.

Do this in memory of me.”

Let us proclaim the mystery of our faith:

**Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!**

Come now tender Spirit of our God,

wrestle with us that we know Your will.

Sanctify these gifts of bread and wine,

that the bread may be a communion with the body of Christ,

and the wine a communion with his blood.

Bless us as we eat and drink these gifts,

lift us into the presence of the Most High,

that with the saints who have gone before us,

and who will come after us,

we may praise Your name for ever and ever, Amen.

To prepare ourselves to meet the Lord in Holy Communion we sing the Lamb of God.

 *You could say the words of the Lamb of God or find a sung version to sing.*

**Post Communion Prayer**

Strengthen us O God,

to relieve the oppressed,

to hear the groans of poor prisoners,

to reform the abuses of all professions;

that many be made not poor to make a few rich;

for Jesus Christ’s sake. Amen.

*Oliver Cromwell (1599-1691)*

 *from the URC Worship Book 2*

**Blessing**

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Who Would True Valour See | 557 | 535 | 486 |  |
| Love is the Touch of Intangible Joy |  | 115 |  |  |
| Be Still My Soul; The Lord is on Thy Side |  | 691 |  |  |
| Beyond the mist and doubt | 490 |  |  |  |
| Give to me lord a thankful heart | 497 |  | 520 |  |
| Just as the tide creeps over silver sand |  | 689 |  |  |
| Through the Night of Dark and Sorrow (try it to Ebeneezer) |  |  |  | 948 |
| Sent by the Lord Am I |  | 250 | 239 |  |