

August 3, 2014

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

"When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him".

It is seldom that I select an Old Testament text as the focus for my homilies....but I find the extract from the book of Genesis that we heard today to be one of the most mysterious and thought provoking pieces of scripture in the whole Bible.

You will, or should I rather say, we hope you will recall the Lectionary reading from Genesis a couple of weeks ago when Jacob's twin brother Esau forsook his birthright as the firstborn for just a bowl of stew. However it was not just another bowl of stew because Esau had gone many long hours working in the fields without food and was famished.

In the build up to today's story. particularly in Genesis, Chapters 27 and 28 we read of the growing hatred of Jacob by his brother Esau, to the point that Esau swore to kill his twin.

The story of Isaac the twins' father and Rebekah the mother and their relationship with their twin sons is one of deceit, conniving and betrayal. Jacob was Rebekah's favorite and there is no way that Esau was going to recover his birthright.

I encourage us all to reread that portion of Genesis.....to learn how not to raise a family and how not to set off one family member against another.

Reading it now, as a Grandfather, I am amazed at the story. it is the realization that Israel was born and has lived through the generations and still lives in a constant state of turmoil.

With the greatest love and respect for our forebears in faith, I have to use the word mayhem to describe the history of Israel.

This word mayhem is only reinforced by the current bloodletting in Gaza. Regardless of rights or wrongs.....the outcome is the slaughter of hundreds if not thousands of innocent souls.

It must make God the Father weep in heaven....that we human beings just don't learn from the error of our ways.

Yet..... in spite of all this..... Israel... as a people, not a political entity, gave birth to the greatest gift that God has ever bestowed on the human race....the source of all that is good in our lives...our Savior Jesus Christ.

In today's story Jacob was paralyzed at the thought of meeting Esau. He had expended his energy in elaborate preparations for the coming encounter with his brother. But instead, we read of his encounter with God, for which he was completely unprepared

Jacob and his family were travelling to meet his brother and he sent his family ahead of him across the river Jabbok.

One might note at this point, what one may surmise as a play on words . The Hebrew word "Jabbok" is defined as "a pouring out, or a wrestling, also one of the streams on the east of Jordan".

It is reasonable to assume that the name Jabbok was given to the river to memorialize Jacob's experience.

I think it is also very reasonable to come to the conclusion that up to this point Jacob was hardly pure as driven snow. He was highly manipulative in terms of his brother's rights and had good reason to be wary of his brother's wrath. I am not sure I would have settled down for the night alone and unprotected, regardless how far away Esau was supposed to be.

In any event Jacob **was** alone, and did indeed settle down for the night.....Suddenly he is conscious of an assailant. "A man wrestled with him until daybreak" .

Who was it that Jacob wrestled that night? Was it a man or an angel? The person's identity emerges gradually, and Jacob is quick to pick up on every clue. There seems to be no question that the writer of this passage (originally probably Jacob) intended it to be taken literally. As far as the mysterious wrestler was concerned, he was in the form of a man, but I surmise it was probably an angel. Angels had eaten a meal with Abraham, and two of them had been the objects of the sexual desires of the Sodomites, so there is no doubt that angels can take on the physical characteristics of men if they need to do so.

The Holy Spirit indicates that this was an angel as He inspired Hosea to write: In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with The Angel and overcame Him;

In Jacob's evaluation, his wrestling partner was more than even an angel. It was none other than The Angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ, and the visible manifestation of the invisible God. It is of interest that Rabbis teach that this man was the guardian angel of Esau.

As Jacob began to pray that night, little did he know that as he cried out to God for strength and deliverance that he would end up wrestling with God Himself. I would think that as he wrestled in prayer, it was as though he sensed that God was really present with him.

As he cried out more and more in prayer, God's presence became more and more real to him until, suddenly, He **was** real! His uplifted arms were actually clinging to God Himself, God in human form. Jacob felt that, if he ever let go, it would mean that God had left him with his prayer unanswered; and so he clung desperately, pleading all the while for His blessing. God in His grace allowed him to hang on, seeing that Jacob's faith and understanding were growing as he clung.

But then, perhaps to forever remind Jacob of the experience, He touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched and slightly dislocated as he wrestled with him. This would be a continual reminder of this unique encounter, but Jacob continued to struggle for the blessing, despite having a dislocated hip.

At some point, when God saw that Jacob would not relent, He finally gave him the blessing he sought. Of course since we are talking about our all powerful God the Father It wasn't that He *couldn't* overpower him, He simply allowed Jacob to hold on.....He clearly desired to bless Jacob.

Then the Lord said: Let Me go, for it is daybreak. The fact that the wrestling lasted until daybreak is significant. For the darkness symbolized Jacob's former situation, but when one is willing to hold on till daybreak, the Lord is always there ready to help us.

And thus The Lord God transformed Jacob to become Israel, the righteous founder of a righteous people.

Almost exactly 2,000 years later our Lord Jesus was born in the land of Israel. The ultimate goodness was born into this world as a complete human being. Jesus Christ was born into Jewish Society, born and raised by humble working parents.

Our Lord Jesus the fount of all goodness and light who makes such an incredible difference in our lives.

Earlier in my homily I talked about the turmoil and even mayhem that has been a continuous part of Israel's history.

I reflect that the turmoil in the evolution of the Israeli society is, in so many ways, a mirror image of the whole human society.

Throughout history, there is one feature where we human beings receive the highest marks. That is in our innate ability to distrust, fear, hate, resent and be hostile to anyone that we feel is different from ourselves. We all know the categories, differences in wealth, social class, education, color of skin, sexual orientation, gender, privilege, birthright, nationality, dress, body tattoos or piercings, religion of course, and tribal sects within religions. Even the size and shape of our bodies causes feelings of hostility, rural versus city dwellers. Language differences and associated cultural differences including different types of humor.

Peoples and nations have waged war against each other for any and all the above reasons since time began, and frequently people don't even remember what the original difference was all about, the Irish problems being an illustration of that.

There is of course only one real solution to all these human differences ....., Jesus Christ. Our Lord taught us that God loves all of us human beings equally.....we will find eternal peace and love by accepting the bread of life....the love of God.

The feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle that features in all four Gospels is telling us that very fact. That the love and blessing of God extends not just to Jacob and Esau, Rebekah and Isaac. Not just to those five thousand souls on the hillside listening to our Lord Jesus. Not just to the Israeli nation, the Hamas and citizens of Gaza. Not just to all who suffer from oppression or the perils of over-stuffed bellies.

The love of God is the answer and how are we so certain? Jesus Christ told us so.....Amen