

Testing, testing, testing.

(readings are on pages 4 and 5)

You know the expression, 'testing, testing, testing!' We hear it in what setting?

When checking the microphone, what does it imply? (*to the children....what are we doing what does it mean?*)

Can we hear?

Not quite the same thing; are we listening?

A further extension; what meaning to we add to what we hear?

How do the things that we hear relate to us or to others?

Why should we be bothered to think about responding to anything we hear?

Should our emotional responses trigger action or change?

Perhaps this is one of the reasons we gather together today. To tease out meaning together that better connects us to God and to each other. To go beyond hearing to real communication, from a one way process to a two way process that may imply change. Change of view or change of behaviour.

In another sense, today's passages are about testing, testing and testing. Testing of Jacob, of David and of Paul, and each individual's conscience in their relationship with God Almighty. Might this testing relates to us also as we wrestle with the dilemmas of life? The things we struggle to make sense of or understand.

In our own 'dark nights of the soul' do we contend with negative emotions or troubling thoughts? Do we eventually make sense of them? Do we prevail or overcome them?

Today's allocated theme was selected from the gospel passage from Matthew. *The Miracle of a Galilean Hillside.*

Song: [Five Loaves and Two Fishes](#)

We are probably familiar with this passage, commonly referred to as the 'Feeding of the Five Thousand';

'When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, "This place is desolate and the hour is already late; so send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!" They said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

(if children present?) **A testing time for the disciples; how could they achieve this, an impossible task? What about a child's view as imagined in the song?**

The subsequent feeding by Jesus and his disciples of the large crowd of hungry folk from a meager reserve of five loaves and two fish was a miracle indeed!

The other passages for today fit less readily into the theme of miracles. Or do they?

The first reading from Genesis is of Jacob wrestling all night, and with whom? - an angel, with God, with his conscience?

The second reading from David, Psalm 17, refers to another period of testing

'If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress..... , I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.'

Another argument within David's soul as to why he is in the position he is in despite his righteous acts or good standing with God. What is being tested here? I feel it is his righteousness. He is feeling self-righteous; surely he is ready to take position as King?

The third reading is from the letter of St Paul to the Romans. Again, if we tap into the emotions of the passage, Paul is feeling at odds. His position in relation to his faith and his responsibilities has set him apart

from his people, his tribe, his nation and his emotional attachments. He grieves but is resolute. As we remember, Paul also had a great burden of guilt to deal with, as a former persecutor of Jesus' followers.

Looking back again at Jacob again. Why would he have been in such a state? The first verse reads, '*Jacob, took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.*' Now that in itself would represent something of a human headache, imagine travelling with this entourage but that was not the reason for his wrestle.

He sends his family over the river and then, '*a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*'

How do we make sense of this wrestle? Who was he wrestling with?

Was it a real battle, a real test of strength and endurance? We are introduced to the adversary as a man but there emerges a supernatural aspect to the account. All night they battle yet despite Jacob's physically displaced hip the battle must end as daybreak approaches. In a final verbal exchange Jacob demands to be blessed and his adversary refuses to name himself. However Jacob is blessed and is renamed Israel. Before he limps away in the thin light of day, he names the place, *Peniel* as where he did battle face-to-face with God and prevailed!

This new name for Israel is a combination in Hebrew of words for "wrestle" and "God" (because, *sareta* [you have wrestled] with God [*'el'*] and men you will be called *yisra-el*). When Jacob had returned to Canaan, God commanded him to settle in Bethel; there God appeared to Jacob again and repeated that his name was no longer Jacob but Israel. This confirmation of the naming was followed by God confirming his covenant with Jacob (Gen 35:9-12), emphasizing specific elements of the covenant he had made with Abraham (Gen 17:1-8). The name, expressing the concept of wrestling, clinging firmly to God, and overcoming, and God's confirming of his covenant with Jacob, indicates that Israel is to be understood as Jacob's covenant name.

- **How is this story connected with the other stories for today, with David and with Paul? Any threads in common? How is each of them tested?**

What relevance does this story have for us?

We know that Jacob tricked his brother into relinquishing his birthright. Did he carry with him a deep guilty conscience from his past? Is this a point of connection? David and Paul both were both self-righteous and proud in their former and/or formative lives, they too had to face up to their failures and then to receive the extreme saving grace of God.

I think Jacob was being prepared for a larger responsibility in God's plan by this confrontation. God's plan was not just a personal one for Jacob, now Israel and his family, but for all his descendants who came to be called Israelites. A big plan, a miraculous plan stretching forward through history. Originally, his grandfather Abraham received this covenant promise from God. Genesis 17:7

I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

And so, beyond Abraham and Isaac and Jacob (or Israel), a redemption plan, was carried forward through history to King David and from his heritage, the life and death of Jesus, the Messiah. Then that gospel message of grace, of forgiveness, of strength to prevail against the odds was delivered and explained by Paul and the new Israel, through all time to us and to our children and our children's' children.

Maybe, for Jacob, the confrontation was the moment when, in order for the blessing to be bestowed by God something deeply transformational had to take place. Similarly for David, he had many fine qualities but after this Psalm 17, he would fail in his proud self-righteousness. He battled; he was an adulterer and murderer before experiencing God's forgiveness and transformation afresh, to eventually be called beloved of God.

So what have we heard today? Maybe each of us not quite the same thing. As we were listening, **what meaning did we add or relate to our lives?** Any meaning that better connects us to God and to each other?

For me, these passages remind me to take account of the long term purposes of God. Integral to those purposes is a wrestling; moments and times when to be confronted by the past, present or even future failures, sins or confusion is always part and parcel of the journey. A journey that is not just personal but a corporate journey of sin, finding responsibility and finally redemption. By the clear light of day, a new day can be a new beginning and can express the overarching and amazing purposes and plan of God to bring all of creation to a point of redemption.

So even in today's world 'Justice' has stumbled, and her good friends, 'Righteousness' and 'Truth' have made themselves scarce. We can have hope, as we see in the stories of David, Jacob and Paul, that God's leading and intervention can bring about restoration, regeneration and redemption.

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob wrestles with God

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.'

But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'

The man asked him, 'What is your name?'

'Jacob,' he answered.

Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^[a] because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'

Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.'

But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, aying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.'

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Psalm 17

A prayer of David.

Hear me, LORD, my plea is just;

listen to my cry.

Hear my prayer -

it does not rise from deceitful lips.

Let my vindication come from you;

may your eyes see what is right.

Though you probe my heart,

though you examine me at night and test me,

you will find that I have planned no evil;

my mouth has not transgressed.

Though people tried to bribe me,

I have kept myself from the ways of the violent

through what your lips have commanded.

My steps have held to your paths;

my feet have not stumbled.

I call on you, my God, for you will answer me;

turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.

Show me the wonders of your great love,

you who save by your right hand

those who take refuge in you from their foes.

As for me, I shall be vindicated and shall see your face;

when I awake, I shall be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

Romans 9:1-5

Paul's anguish over Israel

I speak the truth in Christ - I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit - I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.