

GENESIS 32:22-32
PERSISTENCE

Wrestling – what does that mean to you? What picture does the word conjure in your mind?

- World Wrestling Entertainment – this is big business with people who are described as global superstars; you can watch it or similar things on TV, on ESPN, Sky Sports and it all a great show; they seem to beat the living daylights out of each other, but you know that it is well-rehearsed, just a show.
 - TV Wrestling: there is a whole generation of people for whom Saturday afternoon on ITV was wrestling time and they sat down to watch Jackie Pallo, Giant Haystacks and Mick McManus do same to each other and it all seemed to be competition and sport, but much of it was showbiz act for the benefit of the audience.
 - Olympic sport – people have gone to Delhi this week to take part in Commonwealth Games in wrestling events and have trained hard for it and will try their hardest to win medals in the sport. They probably would not want to be compared too often to these others!
 - Arm-wrestle – this is about the only wrestling I've ever done and that's a bit of sport too, but not something to take too seriously; we even use the phrase to suggest something is an issue but not a big issue - 'it's just something of an arm wrestle' to suggest that it's not to be taken too seriously.
- So if that is what we mean by 'wrestle' then it's not something to take too seriously; it's a bit of a show for the sake of appearances, but it really doesn't mean too much or matter too much to the people taking part.

I know people who wrestle with all kinds of things: they wrestle with their faith, with questions and doubts; they wrestle with their relationships and how to love other people; they wrestle with themselves, how to do what is good and right. Then we talk about 'wrestling with dilemmas' or 'wrestling with conscience'. Inside, we have questions to resolve, to which we need to find answers, or choices to make that we find hard; or mistakes that we've made and our conscience is telling us that we've made mistakes. That process is so often described as wrestling with something inside us. We all know what that feels like, I suspect, and it's certainly not fun; it is to be taken seriously indeed.

Jacob wrestled with God. Well, that's how it turned out, but it didn't start out that way in his mind at least. Jacob and Esau are twin brothers, but very different. Esau is older; he grows up to be an outdoor man, a hunter, farmer, a strongly spoken man; Jacob is almost the exact opposite to his brother in every way. Being older, Esau will inherit everything from their father, but Rebekah their mother is not content with that; she wants Jacob to get something from this and so she concocts a ruse by which Jacob will impersonate his brother and by pretending to be Esau will gain his father's blessing. It worked; Isaac, their father, was blind and by wearing Esau's clothes and trying to sound like him, Jacob tricks his father. Esau is furious at the trick and threatens to kill his brother. Rebekah sends Jacob away to stay with his uncle until the heat dies down and it might be safe to return home.

14 years at least have passed; Jacob is now a wealthy man, thanks to a few more tricks long way; he has now decided that it is time to go home. So Genesis 32 tells the story of Jacob preparing to meet Esau for the first time in 14 and more years; the first time since he ran away from home in fear of his life. God had promised Jacob that everything would be well and that he would prosper in his homeland again, but that hasn't altogether made everything easy: "*save me...*" (32:11) Being afraid, he sends all of his flocks and herds, his wealth and his family over the river and so he is all alone in his camp. Here is a man genuinely afraid for tomorrow, afraid of what

might happen when he meets his brother, afraid for his own safety, perhaps also afraid for his family. Being afraid, he prays; he asks God for help, rescue, saving!

“So *Jacob...*” (32:24) To the reader this appears at first simply to be two people wrestling together, though there seems no reason. But then there are several things about this story that take us deeper than that:

- “*When the...*” (32:25) this ‘man’, with whom Jacob wrestled, had awesome reserves of power to be able simply to touch Jacob and disable him so. There is something unusual and extraordinary about him.
- “*I will...*” (32:26) What did Jacob recognise in this figure wrestling with him? “bless me” is the kind of language that people use with God; what did Jacob understand was going on?
- “*Your name...*” (32:28) this gives the story its focus, its meaning. The ‘name’ helps us understand what has been going on in the story, that Jacob was not wrestling with a man, but somehow wrestling with God. We might well say that Jacob had been wrestling with God all his life: he had done things that were wrong, like stealing from his brother; not being entirely honest with his uncle, cheating him out of sheep, and knowing that these were wrong; yet we are also given glimpses of God’s grace to Jacob, on the night he left home and at other times and now, here, God is with him on a night full of fear. God wrestles with Jacob and Jacob prevails.
- “*So Jacob...*” (32:30) This experience left him with a permanent limp, but more it left him with a sense of depending on God for tomorrow rather than being afraid, trusting God’s promises rather than trying to sort everything for himself.

The key to this story is here: “*I will...*” (32:26) There is a persistence about Jacob that needs to be applauded; faith and prayer need to be persistent until he can find the blessing of God on his life. Persistence is certainly a quality that God applauds because He gives His blessing to Jacob; Jacob has a sense of peace, perhaps; his fears are calmed and the next day, when he meets Esau, the past is forgotten and the brothers embrace gladly and peacefully. Jacob is a changed man, it would seem: gone are the tricks, the cocky self-confidence, the desire to get his own way; the limp is permanent reminder to trust God, to live by faith.

Persistence is an important Christian quality to have. Faith is such a good thing to have in our hearts and when we start out to live by faith it is all very exciting and new and there’s a great buzz about it. But then things are difficult; life throws up difficult things that we have to deal with or other people are difficult, or even our attitude to church life is not what it once was. So what do we do? There are choices to make and sometimes these are tough choices: there are basically two of them: **either** we give up and since all these things are too hard, we drift away from faith; perhaps we don’t renounce it in a very dramatic way, but we let it drift; we miss a few Sundays at Church and then we stop praying and reading our Bible as regularly as we should and after a time we find that faith has almost gone because given up on these things. **Or**, we persist through difficult things, we keep believing, we keep praying, we keep reading our Bible, we keep coming to Church and God rewards that persistence; it doesn’t seem very dramatic and exciting, but persistence is a quality that is worth its weight in gold!

After service today we have our prayers for healing; there are people whose names have been on our list for a long time, even years! What are we to do? Give up praying for them? Or persist, keeping on praying for them? There are times when the list gets too long and we need to make it more manageable, but there is always room to keep praying for people in need. You’re trying to read Bible, but not getting anywhere with understanding it: what to do? Either we give it up saying ‘I’ll never get it’ or we persist saying ‘I’m going to grasp what this book is all about one way or

another.' You have questions about faith for which you want to find answers; you read books, you read the Bible, you ask the minister, till you find answers that make sense to you and that strengthen faith. Or do you try once and give up and leave whole notion of faith behind? Persist! Keep looking; keep reading, keep praying.

Timothy, the young man who was Church leader in Ephesus, had been mentored and shaped by Paul and Paul writes to him to encourage him to persist in works of his ministry. The picture he paints of the situation in which Timothy must exercise his ministry is not an easy one: "*For the...*" (2 Timothy 4:3f) People are not wanting Timothy's ministry, but are looking elsewhere for their spiritual titillation; people are rejecting Timothy for other people because they are no longer willing to listen to the truth. Timid Timothy, with feelings of fear and rejection – what will he do? It must have been a real possibility that Timothy would simply run away and hide when he felt that the Church no longer wanted his leadership, his preaching. "*Continue...*" (2 Timothy 3:14) That's the crucial word – 'continue!' "Keep believing; keep reading the Bible; keep preaching; keep the truth before the Church at all times!" We have to think that Timothy did persist and persevere.

There are times when being a Christian is not easy. There are all sorts of circumstances that make that true. Sometimes it is the simple circumstances of life that make it hard to be a Christian: because life is hard, we suffer, others suffer, things go wrong, we lose a job, there is no job and in midst of all of that we begin to question our faith and God and what life is all about. It happens so often. There are times when we make it hard for ourselves: we drift away from Church, or our friends, turn into our shell and stop communicating with other people; we stop praying and reading the Bible and begin to lose contact with God, we drift away from Him. Sometimes even the very people to whom we look for support are the ones who make life hard: they say things or do things that hurt and Churches are not immune from that. So there are times when being a Christian is hard! Been true for all of us at some stage in life, I suspect.

Persist and persevere. Persist with faith; persist with prayer, with Bible reading; persist with God; persist with Church; persist with Christian service in whatever form that takes for you; persist as a Christian. Be inspired by Jacob: "*I will...*" (Gen 32:26) Take that spirit into your praying, into your faith. We wrestle – is that how it seems? We wrestle with ourselves, with our conscience and our guilt, with questions and doubts, with Church, with God – but we do not give up! Even more, be inspired by Jesus, who persisted even to the cross and who died for us; the ultimate example of perseverance. Continue and let nothing daunt you and may God's blessing rest on you.