



Something to Wrestle With

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Genesis 32:22-31, Matthew 14: 13-21

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As time goes by it becomes easier and easier to forget the difficult work done by trailblazers of the past. The name trailblazer literally means a person who found a new way forward by burning a pathway that others could follow. We have had many trailblazers in this community. I think of the courageous women who 50 years ago worked towards and achieved the ordination of women in this church. There were those who gathered in the basement of this building only a few years later to found ways to challenge the racist practice of apartheid in south Africa by protesting the springbok tour. And I'm not sure how many people really appreciate the effort that went into this country becoming a nuclear free nation, much to the chagrin of the world's superpowers.

These campaigns and many more besides, faced huge challenges, many setbacks, and passionate opposition. There are those among us who still carry the scars of that work and are rightly deserving of our ongoing appreciation. They are part of a long tradition of activism within the church and beyond it. The courage of yesterday plays an important part in shaping the world as we know it today.

The cost of challenging inherited wisdom is not new. When Galileo promoted the idea that the sun was at the centre of the solar system not the earth, the Roman Inquisition rejected this new understanding because it conflicted with the way they understood scripture. Actually, that's an understatement. The Inquisition stated that, the concept of the earth revolving around the sun was foolish and absurd and heretical due to its contradiction of scripture. The scriptural passages in question are references to the Earth as being immovable such as in the first verse of Psalm 93.

Galileo, however, did not believe his scientific views contradicted scripture in any way. This was because he believed that poetry, songs, and

even recorded history in biblical texts did not need to be interpreted literally. Galileo's approach to scripture was no less reverent than that of the Inquisition, but it had allowed him to reach different conclusions to that of the institutional church in that time. In his own words Galileo said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect ... intended us to forgo their use."

While Galileo certainly suffered as a result of his falling foul of the Inquisition he fared much better than one of his predecessors a generation earlier. Giordano Bruno was a Dominican priest who like Galileo advanced the idea that the sun was the centre of the solar system. Bruno rightly claimed that the sun was not the centre of the universe but was one star travelling through space like any other. He also went on to suggest that there could be other worlds like earth elsewhere in the universe, orbiting stars, also supporting life.

Whereas Galileo was placed under house arrest by the Inquisition, Bruno paid a much heavier price. In 1600 having been convicted of heresy, Bruno was burned at the stake. He is regarded as one of the first martyrs to science.

How can such a death be justified? In that time it was the view of the church, that simply by sharing ideas that differed from established understandings a person could be put to death. That seems a strange conclusion for any Christian to reach. What this highlights is that in our history, the times when Christians have become entrenched in their thinking, are the times when they have caused the most harm. In short, the times of greatest certainty have been the times of greatest persecution. Furthermore, such times are the ones most in need of courageous free thinkers and advocates for change.

I accept that some passages of the bible suggest that certainty is virtuous to some extent. But there are many more passages that affirm doubt, struggle and uncertainty as essential parts of our journey with God. Struggle and doubt are no less virtuous than certainty, in fact I would suggest that perhaps doubt is more virtuous as it dares to seek greater truth even when doing so is unwelcome.

One of the great riches of scripture is that many of the stories of great historical people are presented warts and all. The patriarchs and matriarchs are very human people who struggle in their relationship with God. For example, Moses was a murderer as was David, and Jael, and Judith. Yet the bible tells us that such people were not solely defined by moral failings or criminal acts. The bible holds the view that human beings are complicated.

Today's passage from the book of Genesis comes towards the end of a very complicated biblical character's story. It is part of the story of Jacob, a person remembered as heroic in some cases, but also as someone who was deceptive and cunning. As a young man Jacob had tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and had deceived his father into giving him the blessing intended for his brother. Unsurprisingly Esau vowed vengeance upon Jacob intending to take his life. Today's reading from Genesis marks the moment when Jacob is about to face up to his past actions. After many years Jacob is returning to face his brother knowing full well what he has done.

And then comes one of the strangest passages in the book of Genesis. Jacob encounters a being, who is sometimes referred to as a man, other times as an angel and yet on other occasions as God. Stranger still is that Jacob is drawn into a wrestling match with this being. Certainly, Jacob is something of an underdog, yet he prevails in this struggle. The being gives Jacob a new name, Israel. One of the meanings of Israel is one who has struggled with God.

Names are incredibly significant in the bible. Jacob's entire story is an account of a person who struggles with God. The name Israel is a good fit for Jacob. It is no less significant that Israel is the name of the Jewish state reestablished in Palestine during last century. Those who have struggled with God, makes a certain sense.

Now I cannot make that connection with today's reading and not say something about the ongoing catastrophe in Gaza. The name Israel means one who has struggled with God. But what we are witnessing in Gaza is not a struggle with God. It is what happens when a state becomes so certain of its divine right to land, and so certain of its own justification,

that it loses the capacity to see the humanity of those it is destroying. That is not struggling with God. That is the abandonment of the struggle.

The death toll in Gaza is catastrophic. The majority of those killed have been civilians. Children. This is the consequence of a theology of certainty, the conviction that God is entirely on one side, that the cause is so righteous that no action taken in its name requires examination or restraint.

Christianity has made exactly this mistake before. The Inquisition that burned Giordano Bruno was equally certain of its righteousness. But certainty of that kind does not serve God. It serves power.

The invitation of today's reading is not to certainty but to struggle. To wrestle with God as Jacob did, honestly, persistently, even painfully, and to emerge from that struggle changed. Peace in our world will not come from those who are most certain. It will come from those willing to wrestle with the hardest questions, to sit with the discomfort of not having all the answers, and to refuse to let go until peace becomes our reality. If our understanding of God permits the destruction of an entire people, then it is that understanding of God we must wrestle with. Amen.