



**Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 16
October 2016**

Congratulations to Tony and Veronica!

It's wonderful to be able to celebrate with you both this morning – to celebrate your marriage and your renewal of vows, to celebrate all that you bring to this community. Even when the readings – a fight, a warning and the story of a formidable widow – don't really want to co-operate with that celebration!

We'll come back to this celebration later, but I want to start with the reading from Genesis – the mysterious and frankly strange little vignette of Jacob wrestling by the river.

The setting of this vignette in Jacob's own story is important. Jacob is coming home – after a long time away, after deceiving his twin brother and cheating him out of his father's blessing and his birthright, after marrying (twice!) and becoming rich.

So Jacob is scared. He's about to meet his brother for the first time since he cheated him. And Jacob is alone. He's sent his family on ahead and he's on his own, by the river. It's dark. And a mysterious stranger appears in the night. He grabs Jacob and wrestles with him. And Jacob nearly wins – until the figure dislocates his hip with a single touch.

It's a really odd story, and the more you think about it the odder it is. It's like a dream or a fairy tale – and what makes it particularly dreamlike is that Jacob doesn't seem to notice how odd it is. Jacob seems to take it in his stride. He's attacked, so he wrestles. He nearly wins, he's seriously injured, but he hangs on. And when the mysterious stranger asks him to let him go, he responds pragmatically. I'll only let you go if you bless me.

Either Jacob's in a dream world where nothing needs to make sense – or he's realised something about the person who's wrestling with him.

Jacob is given a new name. He's given a blessing. And the stranger in the night refuses to tell Jacob his own name.

That sounds like God. Turning up when least expected – when Jacob is at his lowest – requiring a lot of Jacob, but giving a lot in return. Giving a new name – a name that is about Jacob's willingness to wrestle, rather than give up. Giving a blessing – a blessing that rewrites the blessing Jacob cheated his father out of. Giving a new identity, an identity in God, with which Jacob can face his brother.

That identity, Israel, he who struggles with God, becomes foundational. Struggling with God becomes central to the way the people of Israel see themselves – and it's still part of Jewish self-identity now. Given that the other central image of the relationship between Israel and God is a marriage, this might be a bit worrying – especially for Tony and Veronica! But I think they're two sides of the same coin – I've only been married for 5 years, but there is definitely an element of struggle (let's say negotiation?). And equally, there's an intimacy in struggle. Jacob's wrestle, all night, is as much intimate as it is hostile. When the people of Israel

define themselves as the people who struggle with God, they're defining themselves as people who are related intimately to God – they are so confident of God's love and God's faithfulness, and of their own love for and faithfulness to God, that they can confidently struggle with God.

I remember the first time I had an argument with one particular friend – and I realised how close I had become to her, that I could argue quite passionately without being afraid that by arguing, I'd lose her friendship. I felt safe in that relationship – safe enough to be angry with her. That's the kind of thing that is going on when the relationship between God and God's people is depicted, simultaneously, as struggle and as marriage.

Because faithfulness to God, just like faithfulness in marriage, involves hard work. For Jacob, it's about struggling – physically wrestling. And sometimes it can feel like that – when things are hard, when the reasons to give up on God seem better than all the reasons to carry on, when something terrible has happened and we just want to shout at God for letting it happen. That's when we wrestle – we struggle. And that's when the image of marriage is really helpful. Because if we're married, hopefully we don't give up on the relationship the moment something becomes difficult – hopefully we are willing to struggle through issues, to cling on to the promise of faithfulness even when that's incredibly tough. Clearly this doesn't always work in marriages – which is why we celebrate the anniversaries, like Tony and Veronica's, where it does. But it's the ideal.

So when Jesus tells his story of the unjust judge and the persevering widow, perhaps the people hearing it were those finding it tough to cling on to faithfulness in God. It sounds as if they were feeling discouraged – depressed – despairing. Whatever they needed, they felt as if God wasn't providing it. But Jesus says don't give up. Carry on. God is not an unjust judge – God is supremely just. So if even an unjust judge gives in in the end – you will get there too. God is faithful.

God's faithfulness, says Jesus, is not in doubt. But God's faithfulness can't happen without our faithfulness.

One of the useful things about the marriage image is that it reminds us that faithfulness isn't just one way. The covenant relationship of marriage is a relationship that has to be between two people – and it only works if both people are committed. God is more committed to us than any human partner in a marriage – but still Jesus says that without our commitment – our faithfulness – our perseverance, that relationship doesn't work. God doesn't stop being faithful, but if we give up on God, we can lose the ability to see what God is doing and to receive God's blessing. Jacob receives God's blessing because he struggles and he asks.

So what does it mean to be faithful to God?

The explanatory note to the parable says that it's about praying always and not losing heart. It's very easy to lose heart – to think that there's nothing we can do, and therefore, nothing that God can do. To think that the world, or our lives, or the people we love are in such a state that God must be absent. To despair. I find that the more news I read, the more I despair – I feel helpless. I feel as if there is nothing anyone can do. I can't even see that there is anything God can do.

But I have promised, like you, to be faithful to God. And being faithful to God means taking all those feelings to God – realising that God is bigger than my despair. Acknowledging all the things that are discouraging and depressing, and taking them to God. Sometimes to wrestle. Sometimes to cry. Sometimes to shout. But, in the end (and that end may not be until the Kingdom comes), to be held and comforted, as the wrestle turns into an embrace and a blessing.

God will not abandon us, says Jesus. So remain faithful.
God will keep his promises, says Jesus. Will we?