

# Sermon preached at Gisborne, 2 August 2020

*Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear your Word and obey your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

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

## **Left alone with God**

Have you ever experienced/felt that you were left alone, and there seemed no one else around? It may depend on what you see through an event namely - being 'left alone.' 'Being left alone' is often associated with negative feelings because of the word 'alone.' Today we'll see if it is the case from fresh perspectives. We see being left alone is a chance to be with God by which something extraordinary things happen. For example, Jacob's identity is renewed when he is left alone with God. Jesus is able to resume his ministry despite the hostility and threats in real-life. The disciples have both – reaffirming their identity as children of God and their mission by obeying Jesus. It will also lead us to the newness of being 'left alone with God' in our context.

## **Left alone with God - Jacob**

Being left alone with God enables Jacob to renew his identity. At the beginning of Genesis 32, Jacob has heard that his brother Esau is coming to meet him, accompanied by four hundred men<sup>1</sup>. He is in panic<sup>2</sup> as he assumes Esau is coming to attack him (32:8). As his name Jacob יַעֲקֹב (*Ya'aqov*) which means 'holder of the heel' or supplanter,<sup>3</sup> shows, he has no time to waste. He begins to pray to God for deliverance while planning how to minimize the damages. It includes sending a present to Esau and dividing his camp. Now Jacob has sent his wives and children across the river Jabbok.<sup>4</sup> While Jacob is alone, in the night, at the ford of the Jabbok that a yet unidentified man wrestles with him. We may infer two things about this man. First, Jacob wrestles with his self. Fear for his life has even made him abandon his duty to protect his family in this strict patriarchal culture. The mixture of feelings of shame, fear, regrets, doubts – anything he can think of is there. Yet it will not go away by itself unless he meets with more a powerful thing/person face to face. There is very little detail given to any specifics about the wrestling match except for its length; it lasts until the dawn which is about to break. It is intense and life-threatening.

Jacob seems to understand the 'man' to be God - '*elohim*' as he receives a new name – Israel<sup>5</sup> from him. Who else but God would be so bold as to give a blessing on Scrapper-with-God a blessing? It also implies a special and continuing relationship between deity and human individual (cf. 35:11). At the same time, the encounter with God forces him to face a flawed and sinful Jacob. Through this experience, Jacob sees Peniel, the face of God. It also helps us understand who we are through our recognition of who God truly is. It doesn't eliminate all his concerns and fear.<sup>6</sup> Yet what Jacob learns in the struggle at the Jabbok is not that he is a schemer, but that God knows who he is and accepts him anyway. The 'miracle' of the Jabbok is, in reality, the good news, the gospel, that God engages us as we are and, having named our name, preserves us (v. 30) to transform us. Now we turn to Jesus.

## **Left alone with God - Jesus**

In Matthew 14, two contrasting meals are in view: Herod's birthday party and Jesus' feeding of the crowds. In the former story, in the middle of a context of plenty, we see the gruesome details of Herodias' scheming. A

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 32:6

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 32:7

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 27:36; he is often seen as a trickster as he twice deprived his brother of his rights as the firstborn son

<sup>4</sup> An eastern tributary of the Jordan which is located about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea at the border of Ammon (cf. Numbers 21:24, Deuteronomy 2:37 and 3:16, Joshua 12:2, Judges 11:22). The river's name, Jabbok, plays on the name Jacob, and is related to the word "wrestle".

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew meaning of Israel is 'God contended', 'Wrestles with God.'

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 32:3-8

prophet of God is murdered by a threatened authority. In the second story, amid a situation of needs, we see Jesus moved by great compassion, curing the sick and providing a bountiful meal for the crowds. Though apparently under threat himself and unable to make a successful withdrawal (14:13), he becomes the host for a hungry multitude. To find out more, we'd like to see the location where Jesus and the crowds are - It's in the wilderness.

In Matthew 14:13, under the title of 'Feeding the Five Thousand', it reads, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns."

When Jesus hears about his cousin John the Baptist's horrible death, he withdraws by himself into "a deserted place" (*erēmos*). As imagined, the wilderness is a barren place. It is lonely, deserted, uninhabitable, and desolate – literally and metaphorically. John the Baptist preaches repentance in the wilderness. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, immediately following his baptism, to fast and be tested in preparation for his ministry. Wilderness time can last a long time, forty days or forty years, or it may be brief. Wilderness is a good place to grieve, pray, repent, and fast. It is also a place of being left alone. But God is not absent. Because there are no distractions in the wilderness, it is a place of encountering God face to face. In this story, however, Jesus' time in the wilderness is cut short not by his own choosing, but by the crowds who follow him there. While dealing with the death of John the Baptist and the hostility to him, Jesus responds to the needs of the crowd. They also join him in this deserted place. Similar to Jacob, the crowds also need Jesus' blessings. His compassionate responses to them are the blessings as they prefigure the coming of God's kingdom. But the entire event becomes great challenges for the disciples.

### ***Left alone with God – disciples (and us!)***

For the disciples, a challenge to feed the crowd in the wilderness is another form of being left alone with God. When Jesus' compassion for the crowds rubs off on the disciples, they become concerned about the lateness of the hour and the lack of available food for the multitudes. Against their suggestion to send them to the surrounding villages to buy food, his instructions are decisive: 'They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat.' The resources the disciples can muster are minimal. Despite millions of questions they may have in their minds, they obey Jesus. As they left everything behind to follow Jesus, they experience the same again - being left alone with God. But Jesus helps them to discover that such minimal resources are sufficient. In his hands, they become more than enough for all.

In this feeding of five thousand, we also find a eucharistic meaning: the orderly arrangement of the people, the prayer of invocation and the blessing, the liturgical act of breaking the bread, the immediate parallel to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.<sup>7</sup> At Communion, we are reminded that Jesus takes all the dimensions of human brokenness and need seriously. The disciples also learn that they are not left alone to perform the miracle. But they function as essential agents to carry out Jesus' ministry to the multitudes.

In our story time, we heard that an eight-year-old Kevin is left home alone accidentally. While being home alone, Kevin has to learn how to keep their family home safe from the burglars. But he learns more: he becomes to know that his scary neighbour 'old man Marley who was rumoured to be a serial killer is actually a kind but lonely old man. This understanding enables Kevin to listen to Marely about his life and his estranged son and granddaughter. Kevin even says to Marley, 'so give it a shot, for your granddaughter anyway. I'm sure she misses you and the presents.' Kevin is no longer the same Kevin. He has learned about what home and family mean to him. Likewise, being left alone with God is not scary, but the blessings of a new beginning for anyone. As a faith community, where are we now, then? Is there something that makes us feel left alone in the wilderness? We are not alone at all as we are already living in the new name - Christ Jesus as his body. May God keep us living as Christ' hands and feet and body so that we can feed the multitudes who are being left alone in the wilderness not knowing where to go. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus takes control and hosts the meal. He blesses the food and gives it to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. The language of "taking," "loaves," "blessed," "broke" "gave to disciples", "ate," and "all" in 14:19 appears in the last supper scene in 26:26-27 (with no cup!), but the two are linked by the use of food in the dispersal of divine blessing.