

Lectionary Readings for 7th Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 28:10-22; Psalm 139; Romans 8:12-25; St Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43.

“Jacob..... dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

Do you remember in the 1960s, the TV series, *The Fugitive* starring David Jannsen? This was the one programme that I would never miss. It was compelling drama. Dr. Richard Kimble is a man on the run from the law. Wrongfully accused and then found guilty of his wife's brutal murder, he escapes his own death-sentence by miraculously surviving a terrible accident and then by managing to elude a relentless police detective.

He is a man for whom we cannot help but feel sympathy and compassion; and his simple honesty and goodness elicit the same kind of response from just about every stranger he happens to meet.

There is something about the underdog, the decent person who has been dealt a bad hand by life with which just about any of us can immediately identify. We can't help rooting for this man to make it in the end because we want to believe that somehow, somewhere goodness is on our side. That justice will prevail. That right will win out. That God will not forget about us.

The Bible's version of how all this plays out is the story of Jacob; and it is as different from any Hollywood story of how goodness prevails, as night is from day.

Jacob is a fugitive but not the kind of fugitive for which anybody feels any sympathy. He is a man on the run not because of what others have done unjustly to him but because of the nasty things he has done to them. He is also a mummy's boy who owes his life to his mother twice: the day she brought him into the world alongside his twin-brother Esau and the day she saved him from being strung up by Esau.

Jacob's adventures throughout chapters 25-36 of Genesis read like a long-running soap opera except....Jacob survives by being cunning, certainly, but also because he never seems to get what he deserves. Jacob always gets more. He cheats his brother out of his birthright and gets away with it.

Then years later, he cheats him again, this time out of the blessing that was rightfully coming to Esau, and he gets away with that too. He not only gets away with it; once his crime is known, both Rebekah and Isaac cover up for him. When Rebekah discovers that Esau is ready to kill his brother, she makes up a lame excuse to her husband that it would be a bad idea for Jacob to marry a foreign girl now that he is heir to the family blessing.

Now. Jacob is somewhere between a place where he is no longer welcome and a place where he has never been. He's guilty, defenseless and scared; and he hasn't got a friend in the world. He finds himself out in the hill country north of Beer-sheba. Worn-out and stressed-out, he lies down under the night sky with nothing but a stone for a pillow.

And here Jacob dreams a dream. And we can identify with Jacob can we not? Do we not toss and turn at night, often because that is the time we come face to face with the things we have been running from all that day, or all of our lives.

With his defenses down, and his unconscious running the show, you would expect that Jacob would have slept the sleep of the guilty, complete with nightmarish visions of the father he had deceived and the brother he had betrayed. Getting what he deserved. Well, no.

For the story says Jacob dreamed a dream. Jacob dreams a dream of a stone stairway set up on the earth and reaching all the way up into heaven. Angels are ascending and descending on this ramp; and there, right beside him, is the Lord God himself, speaking to Jacob, not words of reproach and accusation, but of great comfort and blessing. Have a look at Genesis 28 verses 13-15 for God's words.

It was more than Jacob ever dreamed of trying to get. More than his own father could have given him. More than God had ever promised anyone; because he even reassures Jacob by saying that he will stick with him until every last part of the promise is kept.

It was, to say the least, quite a promise, quite a blessing and quite a dream. One would have expected God to have had something else in mind for Jacob, a taste of divine wrath, perhaps. A dose of his own medicine.

But this dream was what Jacob got, not to mention the God who went with it. It would take a while for everything to play itself out and for Jacob to become the great father of Israel just as he had been promised; but it didn't take long for Jacob to realize what had happened, and to make the most of it. Upon awakening, he built a monument in honour of the place, called it Beth-el, 'house of God', and then made a vow to God, just to show him that he hadn't lost his touch:

But look more closely - Jacob responds to God's completely unconditional promise of blessing and protection with a completely conditional promise of his own. "**IF** you will give me the land, food, clothing and protection, **THEN** I will be your man."

In response to this incredible blessing of God, all Jacob can think of saying is, "Prove it to me!" Here however, is the remarkable tale of the God who insisted on sticking with the likes of people like Jacob through all the dark days their lives would take them and all the crooked paths they would insist on taking to get wherever they got

Did Jacob himself, for instance, ever "come to his senses" and finally express remorse for having "done" all the people he ever "did"? Did he ever once appreciate the kind of generosity and goodness that he was being shown? Enough to mend his ways, have a change of heart?

The judgment is still out on that one, I suppose, the way it's still out on whether people like you and me have ever fully appreciated what that strange night visitor has been doing for us, going with us every step of the way, and promising never to leave us until it is all ours, too, ever since he said he'd do the same for Jacob and his family.

But the message of the Gospel is that that is precisely what God has been doing all along, what he did most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth, and has been doing ever since for a world, for a church, and for people like you and me who, most days, cannot think of much better to say in response than, "Show me!"

What did Jacob finally give back in the end to the One who gave him everything? What will you and I give back? What can we give back? What should we? One tenth of our lives? Everything? Who knows? The only thing that is certain is what the One who meets us at our Bethel always seems to do, which is to grant us blessed dreams, precisely when we need them, and to give us everything we have never and could never deserve. It is what the Bible means by grace. Because in the Bible it is not anything about us that makes God stick with us. It is something about God.