Genesis 28:10-19a 6th Sunday after Trinity 19th July 2020

Loneliness is a growing concern for many people today. The isolation and lack of physical contact is taking a toll on our mental wellbeing, and it is particularly acute for those living on their own.

Our passage from Genesis 28 describes Jacob’s encounter with God at a time when he has just found himself alone, with the prospect of uncertain and difficult times ahead. He has had to leave the family home because his brother has threatened to kill him. Ahead of him, he has some 500 miles to travel and does not know what sort of reception he will get when he arrives. And that journey itself is fraught with danger for someone travelling alone.

At the end of a days journeying, he lies down to sleep and takes a stone to rest his head on. Whilst he sleeps, he has an extraordinary dream.

Genesis 28:12-15 (NIV)

**12**He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. **13**There above it stood the Lord, and he said: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. **14**Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. **15**I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Jacob is given this extraordinary vision: a stairway linking earth to heaven and messengers, angels of God, going back and forth.

People have always tried to climb up to God. We are told in Genesis 11 of the tower of Babel, and then later during Jacob’s time, the Babylonian Ziggurat temples had enormous staircases attempting to reach upwards to their god. But here, as happens so many times in the scriptures, God is the instigator, connecting with Jacob and bringing him not just comfort, but purpose and assurance for the future. Jacob may have no idea what exactly lay before him, but the Lord does.

We, with our limited perspective on the heavenly realms and the work of the Lord, so often feel that God is hiding from us and that we must labour to be worthy to come into His presence. But the truth is so very different. The Lord longs for us to encounter Him and simply receive Him into our lives. Jesus himself, the Son of God, is described as “Immanuel”, meaning “God with us”.

To help Jacob, God announced himself in familiar terms to Jacob: I am the Lord of your Father Isaac and your grandfather, Abraham. Two people whom Jacob knew well, who had also been blessed with encounters with the Lord and been given great covenant promises by him.

Jacob would have been brought up knowing all the details of those events and how the Lord watched over them and richly blessed them. It must have given him confidence in what the Lord went on to confirm, that the promises given to the two previous generations are going to continue to be fulfilled through Jacob himself.

But Jacob is given a further promise by God that is truly wonderful for him: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.”

Jacob knows that from this point onwards he has that certainty of the Lord’s hand upon him. It does not mean that it is all going to be easy for him. The events surrounding his future bride, Rachel, is proof of that, but it is obvious that the Lord provides for Jacob even through his difficult trials. The Lord is seen as being trustworthy and true, caring, and gracious throughout the whole series of events. It is important for us to understand that our Heavenly Father is consistent and gracious and not fickle or untrustworthy. His persistent love gives us a confidence to trust in His promises to us.

So, what promises has he given us? We are not Jacob; we have not had a dream instigated by God that includes covenant promises. But we do have Jesus’ promise to be God with us. His last words on earth to his disciples were “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

Jesus, the son of God, who was both fully human and fully God, walked amongst us and shared his life with us, living and dying like us. But he was so much more than just a man, for he brought the promise of uniting the faithful with our creator.

One of the other set readings for today, comes from Paul’s letter to the Roman church in which he says that once we are united with Christ Jesus in faith, then “the Spirit [of God] himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:16-17)

It is THE great promise of God. To be part of His family forever and to have the Lord watch over us and journey with us through the ups and downs of this world and on into the next.

For so many in the world today who insist on walking without the Lord’s presence, are living life in the hardest way possible during these times of uncertainty. They are missing out on the spiritual companionship that is part of the Christian life.

Recently, I listened to an interview with a man who had autism from an early age. Every day he went to school he was bullied and did not have any friends. So, he didn’t think that it would ever be possible for him to form any friendships and so resigned himself to going through life on his own and in his own way. He thought that that just had to be the way it was. It was only many years later after leaving school well behind him, that he did form a few friendships. And he then realised how enormously difficult and limiting his lone existence had been. He can now share with his friends what his joys and hurts are, and he knows a sense of value and the richness of life.

How much more so do you think a life united with, and adopted by our loving heavenly Father, will gain in richness and purpose? A life that not only spans the time we have hear on earth, but on into the future. A life where we know that He will not leave us, but in which He promises to bring us to our eternal home in His presence.

What a message to hold onto for ourselves, to encourage our fellow Christians with and to gift to others as we recognise their struggles without the Lord’s glorious presence each and every day.

Amen

Notes:

Verse 12: ‘Stairway’ in the NIV The Hebrew can be translated as either “ladder” or a flight of steps. Similar to those found in ancient ziggurats (see the following photo of a reconstructed ziggurat at Ur).

