

Genesis 32: 22-31

Matthew 14: 13-21

### The journey is home

#### Introduction

We continue the saga of the family descendents of Sarah and Abraham.

Last week we heard how one of the grandsons, Jacob, had set out on a journey to the territory of Uncle Laban, to find a wife from amongst his cousins ... a common and acceptable marriage arrangement in that time that ensured land and wealth stayed within the family and tribe. We heard how Uncle Laban, a slippery customer, tricked Jacob into marrying Leah when he really wanted to marry Rachel - his trickery cost Jacob 14 years.

We pick the story up today with another journey - all the stories have had a journey motif - and there has been much deceit and trickery amongst the family - we might wonder why such a dysfunctional family provides the fundamental dynamic for the story that unfolds the nature of God!

Today we pick up the 'soap opera' as Jacob, with his two wives and the wealth he has accumulated, decides it is time to return to his homeland. Remember he had engaged in a bit of trickery himself when he tricked his older twin brother Esau out of his birthright. So, as you can imagine he is not sure what sort of a welcome he might receive! He is a bit afraid... 'Greatly afraid' ... as well he might be. He had sent a message to Esau saying he wanted to *return home* and his messenger brought back the information Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men! ... Jacob imagines it will not be straight forward – he thinks there can be no 'here I am, lovely to see you simplicity'. So, after some careful planning Jacob sends off, in waves, hundreds of goats and sheep, camels and cows to Esau in the hope of softening him up. Then Jacob sent his wives and the 11 children across the river to safety. In the reading we hear how Jacob, having made all these preparations, spent the night by himself in a bit of soul searching – wrestling with an unknown man, is how it is told – he emerges from that wrestling with a bad hip! Who this 'man' represents has provided scholars with much debate over the years! But given that God has previously been described in human terms (Gen 18:1-2), and the man blesses Jacob and renames Jacob 'Israel' – meaning traditionally "God strives", it is reasonable to interpret the significance of the struggle with the man as a struggle with God. Today, using our psychological knowledge, it is reasonable to also wonder if the struggle is with an aspect of himself – even with that (within himself) that is divine; his old deceitful self with his better self.

In the Gospel reading Jesus is troubled too – he is seeking time alone. Perhaps he is also engaged in a bit of soul searching! He has just heard that John the Baptist, his cousin, has had his head chopped off. No wonder Jesus is also seeking time by himself. But as we hear that is not to be.

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How many of us have ever had a misunderstanding within our families? More than just me I am sure!  
How many of us admit it is our responsibility?

How many of us wish it were different?

Families are like that: all sorts of misunderstandings, all sorts of hurt feelings, all sorts of power-plays, all sorts of differences; politicking, power plays, jealousies. The family saga we are following is reassuring in that all this is part of being a family and yet there is always the possibility of our better-selves coming to the surface and taking charge.

There has been lots of journeying in the saga of the family of Sarah and Abraham over the past few weeks. Today is no different. So it is curious today that after all this time journeying and two generations removed, Jacob wants to go home.

If you have ever been away from home for an extended period you will know how overwhelming that feeling of wanting to go home can be. Jacob wants go home, he is home sick. He has been a bit wicked in his youth so he is not sure he will be welcome.

We are told, that like most of us, Jacob knows before he can go home and expect a warm welcome; he has to sort out the situation he created with his trickery when he left. But nevertheless he sets out on the journey toward home no doubt planning to sort it on the way.

As a woman, I have had a heap of problems with the 'journey' motif that figures so prominently in Christian stories of faith. To me, the way it has been used always seemed to entail women following men, and having to make the best of it provide shelter and food and clothing under difficult circumstances. It seemed to me that men initiated the adventure of travel and women struggled to bring along the comforts of home. So I was delighted when I came across a feminist writer from the early 1900s who wrote a book called 'the journey is home'. She was using the image to point women toward the inward journey of self-discovery we must take to be 'self-identified' and confident in being women and doing what women do – not just what men want women to do – tagging along so to speak. And today we have a story from our bible in which the journey is home.

To get home, truly home, is not as easy and straight forward as it at first appears. Hence Jacob *wrestles* with 'the man' - spending a sleepless night confronting his past I daresay; looking deeply at who he is and wants to be.

Any way what does it mean to 'be at home'? Where is home?

For some it is a particular place - My Mother spoke of England as 'home' for many many years after leaving England where she was born, notwithstanding her husband and children were here in NZ with her.

And I have been asked on more than one occasion if I am 'at home' with this or that, or even if I am 'at home' with myself.

The questions seem to imply that this idea of being 'at home' entails a degree of familiarity; comfortableness and connectedness with the story of a place or a person and an ease with the protocols and expectations. It includes being accepted – warts and all as they say – and knowing that we are accepted and belong.

The story that follows our First Testament reading today, telling of the eventual meeting between Jacob and Esau - could be seen as a bit of an anticlimax. Esau welcome Jacob with open arms, tells him to keep his gifts and marvels at Jacob's family. It is an easy homecoming for Jacob, Esau is pleased to see him and generous with his love, and Jacob and Esau travel a little way together catching up, before parting again. But, we are left in no doubt that without Jacob's ability to know he needed time to wrestle with himself - to get himself sorted, to find a way to 'be at home' with himself - quite possibly the reunion would not have been so easy! An attitude shift was needed and Jacob seems, from the quality of the reunion, to have been able to make the necessary shift. What began as a struggle for Jacob as he faced himself and all he had done in his past, faced God as it were, was blessed into abundance and the nation of Israel took shape as God promised.

Jesus invites us to find ways to get in touch with our better selves, to come home to ourselves, to the divine that is within. What little we feel we have of divine goodness is blessed into abundance when we face our own selves with honesty and find satisfaction with who we are – in other words when we face the God within.

To do this we have to shift the focus of our journey from going somewhere, always seeking to get something else, toward ourselves. We have to stop moving and face where we have come to; we need to become comfortable with who we are and what we have and what we have done – and to put right what is wrong and find ways to let go what we can't change.

To be 'at home' requires us to be sufficiently comfortable where we are to be committed to the health and wellbeing of the family, the community and our self, so that we are willing to take responsibility to maintain that health and wellbeing through loving kindness and compassion however that can be expressed.

And so in the words of Nellie Morton, 'the journey is home'. Jacob knew it. We know it, our journey is home: home to ourselves, then we will know we are blessed.