

Sermon on Sunday 23 July 2023

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Genesis 28. 13: *'I am the God of your Fathers, of Abraham and Isaac'.*

A few weeks ago, Melanie took us back to the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. We've moved on a generation to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, the founding father of the Hebrew race. Jacob, in turn, will be the father of Joseph, he of the Technicolour Dreamcoat.

Genesis 28 tells us how Jacob dreamt of a ladder between earth and heaven, at a place he names Bethel – which means in Hebrew 'the House of God'.

Here he encounters God. And how does this God introduce himself? As the God of Jacob's ancestors, the God of Abraham and Isaac. Perhaps he could also have mentioned that He was the God of Sarah and Rebecca, his grandma and mother. But inclusivity still had a long way to go back in those days.

Jacob named the place 'Bethel'. Place names matter in the ancient Hebrew world. Old folk memories were firmly pinned

down in geography. Bethel, now Beitin, lies some 20 miles north of Jerusalem in the Palestinian West Bank.

The name of Bethel is close to my heart for other reasons. My non-conformist Methodist forbears were not inclined to name their places of worship after Saints, but they did like to give them names of Old Testament places. When I began my preaching ministry in Halifax, Ebenezer chapel and Salem chapel used to glower grimly at each other across the municipal bus station, and in the hilly Pennine villages to the West you could worship God at Mount Zion or on Mount Tabor. If you went up the Bradford road to the village of Shelf, you will still find a big square building, devoid of any ornament in the old Primitive Methodist tradition. That is Bethel chapel, the House of God. My grandfather, and his grandfather lie (with their wives) in the graveyard. There, my ancestors encountered their God.

We go back to Jacob. What does the God of his ancestors have to say to him?

Maybe first I should ask, where does He say it from? Jacob dreams of a ladder reaching up from earth to heaven. But God is not at the top of the ladder, shouting down to Jacob and challenging him to climb up to him if he can. God stands at Jacob's side. The ladder does not reach up to heaven, it

reaches down to earth. God does not summon Jacob to him, he comes to Jacob where he is.

God makes him a promise, a covenant. A promise of protection and of prosperity, the promise of a homeland, the promise of a great nation of descendants. The same promise, in fact, that God had made to his grandfather Abraham, that Abraham had passed on to Isaac and Isaac in turn to Jacob. But here something new happens. It is significant that God feels he has to introduce himself. He doesn't expect Jacob to recognise him. Whenever God is encountered, expect surprises. The God that Jacob has heard about from his parents suddenly becomes the God he has met himself.

God is not content to be the God of his ancestors – he wants to be Jacob's God. His covenant is not a one-off act in ancient history, it is a promise made afresh to every generation. God made us to be his children; God has no grandchildren.

Three thousand years on, maybe 120 generations later, each of us is called to make our own covenant, to step out from behind the spiritual heritage of our parents and ancestors, and stand face-to-face before God. Allow room for surprises.

I'm not a great fan of conversion testimonies, but for us as for Jacob, times and places matter. For me it was not, after

all, at Bethel, but at the more prosaically named Pellon Lane Methodist Church, Halifax, that I had my 'Jacob's ladder' moment, and made my covenant. On Sunday 21 March 1977, the God I had learned of from my father and mother, became my God.

God did not promise to make me a father of a great nation – though in the summer of my eldest son's wedding, you're allowed to hope! He didn't promise me an earthly homeland. But the rest of the covenant is mine. He will nurture and protect me wherever I go, and he will bring me safely at last back to the place where I belong.

God of our Ancestors. I've been looking backwards so far. The message of Bethel, the message of the Covenant, is that our God is the God of our descendants. God is committed to the human race long term, and in spite of all the fear and gloom that has hovered about from the Cold War anxieties of my youth to the climate fears of my middle years, I have faith that we still have a long way to go.

God will be offering his covenant, his promise of loving nurture and protection, to many more generations of mankind. They may not always be seeking him, but as at Bethel, He will come to seek them. He may appear as an old family friend, as a distant and hazy folk memory, or he may appear as a complete stranger. But he won't leave them

alone. But whatever way, expect surprises. The faith he calls them to may work itself out very differently from all that we know of church and creed and praise and prayer in our age. But that shouldn't trouble us.

I imagine my great great grandfather, Thomas Oates, founder of Bethel chapel, and Ann his wife, long since accompanied by their God to the top of Jacob's ladder, looking on with a little surprise to see me in the pulpit of an Anglican church, but rejoicing that God has kept his word, and is the faithful guide of his descendants.



I trust that one day, we too will share such joyful surprises, to see how those who come after us will continue to discover the grace and bounty of our timeless God.

Amen