

## Installation sermon, 26th January 2018: Genesis 35:1-15

*'So Jacob called the place where God had spoken with him Bethel'.*

'Best foot forward', my mother used to say (and maybe yours did, too) when there was still some way to go. No one can step ahead, however, without another good foot behind - to bear your weight and launch you forward. Faith in the future - in what comes next - is powered by the past.

So we find that in every new journey there are constant personal returns: to what is familiar, what is settled. In new situations, we seek to recognise these signs and draw on prior experience, writing fresh material into the old, still rolling, story of our lives. I am told that cats (being introverts), familiarise themselves with spaces rather than people - and make sense of an unfamiliar environment by rubbing themselves around the physical limits of their new home - a kind of feline beating of the bounds. But for most *people*, this physical feeling our way is wound into the *social* - of coming to know, only and even as we are fully known.

To Jacob, returning to Bethel was deeply significant. This old boulder had, as you know, a somewhat snaking journey through life - he faked, fled and fought his way - and the one time he truly came to himself was, coincidentally, the time when he encountered the living God. Not like St Paul, arrested by grace in broad daylight, but asleep, in the dream of a promise. This promise was of God's blessing, God's purpose and presence - not in some nebulous, notional way, but grounded, literally, in the land where he happened to lie. A promise that however inconstant and feckless Jacob had been and might yet be, God would prove to be the opposite. A promise like an anchor for his slippery soul.

Not without reason, then, he named that place Bethel, for it was to him the house of God, the gate of heaven. Therefore when crisis once again overran Jacob, and he saw his own folly spill over into the next generation; saw the sickness and violence of his sons threaten to return on him like a judgement, at once he is called to return - back to Bethel, back to the place of promise, back to where God was.

And, like so many of the flawed heroes of the Bible, Jacob is exceptional in hearing the word of God and doing it. So, with his household, he goes back: sacrifices their pointless idols and heads for Bethel, to set up an altar there - somewhere to offer God the fragments of his brittle life. And what relief to find that the promise still holds good: more than that, is affirmed and amplified. Jacob - Israel - has remembered his future.

New and dear friends, do we not need this too - as people and communities, in our sundered, unholy nation? Are we not recalled this night? Not for retreat into nostalgia, but for renewing hope. At Holy Cross Church in Ramsbury, just before Christmas, there was staged a new theatre production entitled 'The Raven's Call' (Ramsbury meaning 'place of the ravens'), telling the story of a young man, stricken by grief, who finds hope and direction by recalling the history of his village and his own place within it. What a gift we inherit in Salisbury Diocese: that the ancient heart of our communities is so often a Christian church: each one a little Bethel, an altar for our brittle lives, bearing the local promise that God is in this place - and that, however wayward we might be, he will prove to be the opposite.

For, by virtue of the new covenant in Christ - the new promise, sealed by his Spirit - nowhere and no one is excluded (whenever they arrived; whoever they were): it was astounding (we heard earlier) to those who first realised this. We are all known and chosen people - it's all promised land! The risen Christ might meet you in Marlborough or Melbury Abbas; he might meet you in Compton Bassett or Winterbourne Gunner. He might meet you, washed up on the Dorset shore; he might even meet you along the A303 (you'll have time enough...).

So, best foot forward: as 'with the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling', T.S. Eliot wrote, 'we shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploration will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.' To the glory of God. Amen.