CTBI conference

Christianity: continuity, presence and conflict

Dr Clare Amos, WCC programme executive for inter-religious dialogue and cooperation

Bible Study 1 - Conflict

Genesis 32-33 – Jacob and Esau

In these Bible studies I am exploring the themes in reverse order – beginning with Conflict, then moving on to Presence and finally ending up with Continuity.

As I prepared the studies, I realised that you cannot separate out the three themes from each other so, although this first study looks at 'Conflict', you will see the themes of Presence and Continuity are also present. It will also become apparent, throughout all three Bible studies, I have been conscious of links to issues in the modern Middle East.

Our first text is an Old Testament one - Genesis 32.22 - 33.11. It is interesting how rarely Genesis 32 and Genesis 33 are read together although, as I will suggest, unless you do, you will inevitably miss vital aspects of what these chapters are trying to say to us.

I like to find ways of using visual images to help us engage with the Bible – and in the case of this biblical passage there are some really helpful examples. First there is an icon called 'Christ is our reconciliation'. The icon has fascinated me ever since I first caught sight of it in St Ethelburga's Church in London. As many of you will know St Ethelburga's is a church in the City of London which was destroyed by an IRA bomb in 1993 - and then reopened 10 years later as a centre specifically dedicated to the work of reconciliation and peace.

These days a particular focus of its work involves reconciliation between people of different faiths, so it was a very apt place to come across this icon. Across the middle of the icon you can see those words written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew - languages chosen to echo the languages that were used to write up the inscription on Christ's own cross.

The icon was created shortly before the millennium in the Holy Land at a Greek Catholic monastery (Archbishop Elias' church) called St John in the desert - just outside Jerusalem. Implicitly written into the different scenes of the icon are the passion and pain of the Middle East and the Holy Land today - and its need for reconciliation at so many levels: between Israelis and Palestinians, between the three Abrahamic faiths, Jews, Christians and Muslims, between Eastern and Western Christians, and even between different branches of the Catholic church.

The main central scene of the icon illustrates the reconciliation between the two brothers, Jacob and Esau, as described in Genesis 33.4: 'Esau ran to meet Jacob, and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.' It is these words that set the scene which the icon is illustrating.

Yet to understand the full power of the scene and the story - what it has to say to us about conflict, and about reconciliation - we need also to turn to earlier episodes in the story of Jacob. Both the icon and the biblical text hint at this: the icon through the mysterious incorporation of the ladder into the background, a ladder that actually relates to the experience of Jacob at Bethel, in Genesis 28, several chapters earlier in the story; and the biblical text through some words spoken by Jacob to his brother at their meeting in verse 10: 'Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God - with such grace or favour you have received me.' They are words which both Jacob - and we - have quite literally to wrestle with if we wish to appropriate the exquisite yet demanding grace of what he - and

we his spiritual descendants - are being offered. To understand them we need to dig deep into the whole of the book of Genesis.

I believe that there are two great themes in Genesis which ultimately cannot be separated. The first is that human beings have been created as the image or, as the Greek translation of the Old Testament actually puts it, the icon of God. The second theme is that the number two, a sense of duality, is written into the fabric of creation.

Think for example about how creation happens through a series of splits and pairs - light and darkness, land and sea, male and female. This rhythm of twoness is emphasised by the steady refrain at the end of each day - there was evening and morning. Yet this creation is the expression of a God of whom it is said, 'Hear O Israel the Lord is one' and of whom Christians believe that he is unity in Trinity, unity in relationship.

So the question the writer of Genesis is posing throughout the book is how can or should the one and the two relate to each other so that neither dominates or disappears? Both unity and duality are necessary. And it is the task of human beings to live at the very heart of this conundrum – as created beings to be part of the world of duality – in which 'otherness' is important and honoured – and yet also, because we are made in the image of God, to reflect also within ourselves the divine unity.

We are if you like to be a sort of sacrament, showing through our human life, just what it means to be incomplete without the other. This is the tension which Genesis explores, initially through the tale of a man and a woman, but then, and for most of the book, through the stories of brothers. The question of what it means to be a brother is visited again and again. It is as if the book is telling us 'if this can be got right, then the relationship between human beings and God can become what it was always intended to be'.

But nowhere in Genesis does 'brotherhood' get explored as seriously as in the story of Jacob and Esau. It is 'the' issue which binds together this entire section of the book. The story of these particular two brothers is recounted with an intensity unparalleled elsewhere in Genesis. In part this is a reflection of the intimacy of the relationship between Jacob and Esau, not merely even full brothers, but actually twins sharing the same womb. When I wrote a commentary on Genesis I called this section 'Double trouble', for the comparisons and contrasts between Jacob and Esau challenge us with the possibilities and problems inherent in the number two.

Let us take up the tale of Jacob and Esau at the moment when Jacob has been forced to flee to escape the anger of his brother Esau, after he has deceived his father and stolen Esau's blessing. Despondent, he is on his way to what will prove to be twenty long hard years of exile.

At a place called Bethel – the name means 'House of God' – Jacob sees a ladder which stretches between earth and heaven, with angels going up upon it, and even catches a vision of God himself standing by the ladder. That is the ladder shown in our icon.

In the ancient world temples were built to be the earthly house of a god, places where their worshippers would come to meet them and sense their protection. And so in Jacob's night vision, the ladder was there to link God's heavenly and earthly dwellings. Bethel is living up to its very name, which means 'House of God'.

Yet the words that God then speaks to Jacob subvert the very rationale for this holy place– effectively declaring it redundant. For God promises to be with Jacob 'wherever you go'. Normally worshippers had to come to a particular holy building, a temple, to find their god – that was their essential purpose: but as God speaks to Jacob at Bethel he assures him

that he can find God anywhere. This is a God who is not confined by a building or even a holy land. He will be Jacob's travelling companion – but on his own terms.

And in doing so he will offer Jacob an immense challenge. For one way of reading the story of Jacob's experience at Bethel is to suggest that God's promise to Jacob to travel with him was effectively offering Jacob the opportunity to be the gateway to God for others. But it was not an opportunity that Jacob is yet brave enough to accept.

Next we fast forward 20 years to Jacob's eventual return to his homeland. Just as the meeting with God by the ladder at Bethel marked the beginning of Jacob's journey into exile – away from his homeland, afraid of his brother – there is another equally mysterious meeting with God that takes place on his return. It is a wrestling bout with a divine figure which takes place at a river ford called Penuel, a place whose name means the 'Face of God'.

It is one of the most compelling and mysterious narratives in the entire Old Testament. Quite literally it is a passage which challenges us to 'wrestle' with it and refuses to let us go until we have discovered that in this struggle there is a blessing. Martin Buber perceived the episode of wrestling Jacob as a metaphor for wrestling with life's existential questions by all of humanity. Our age has had to struggle with questions of God's goodness and the problem of evil on a massive scale, none more so than Jacob's spiritual heirs, adherents of the Jewish faith, as they have tried to respond to the challenge to faith thrown up by the Holocaust. What does it mean for God's people to be honoured with the name Israel – the one that strives with God and will not let God go in spite of the wounds inflicted by the lengthy struggle?

Biblical scholars have tried to analyse what makes this brief text so fascinating and compelling. The comment by Gerhard von Rad cannot be bettered: '[The narrative] contains experiences that extend from the most ancient period down to the time of the narrator; there is charged to it something of the entire divine history into which Israel was drawn. This event did not simply occur at a definite biographical point in Jacob's life, but as it is now related it is clearly transparent as a type of that which Israel experienced from time to time with God. Israel has here presented its entire history with God almost prophetically as such a struggle until the breaking of the day. The narrative itself makes this extended interpretation probable by equating the names Jacob and Israel.'

But as we have already implied this night wrestling is strangely interconnected with the meeting Jacob has the next day with his brother Esau – that scene depicted on our icon. These two means by which Jacob meet God at this point approach the profoundest insights of biblical spirituality. The key which links them both is the word 'face'.

One of the interesting things about Jacob is that up till now he has never found it easy to look people in the face, especially his brother. His very name means 'heel' and as befits someone of that name he has always been a 'behind' sort of person. But when he wrestles with the angel in the passage we have just read he has no choice: it is a face to face encounter.

Rembrandt has painted an inspired picture of this scene – it is there upon your sheets. In it Jacob is being held by the divine wrestler in such a way that his head is gradually being forced round so that he is compelled to look his opponent in the face. He will not be allowed to avoid confronting his past, his present and his future. There is an incredible frisson to the moment: Jacob is all too aware that to look on the face of God in this way was dangerous – yet it was also his only means of healing.

Jacob's cry as the struggle comes to its close, 'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been preserved' is a cry of both exultation and wonder. The new name – Israel – that he is granted as an apparent blessing through his struggle expresses an ambiguity. For, according to the biblical writer, 'Israel' means 'the one who strives with God'. What a name and a destiny for Jacob to bequeath to his descendants! Is it a blessing to struggle with God, or is it the reverse? Elie Wiesel, writing out of the experience of the Nazi holocaust, speaks of the 'eternal struggle' of the Jewish people 'in more than one land, during more than one night.'

Back in 1940 the Jewish sculptor Jacob Epstein sculpted an extraordinary portrayal of the two figures wrestling. Epstein's intensely personal sculpture was created in the knowledge of the suffering the Jewish people were already enduring at that time. The embrace of Jacob by the angel is tight - so tight that it must have been painful, almost forcing the breath out of him. And yet the massive angel also seems to be supporting the frailer figure with which he is interlocked.

The way the statue portrays the intimacy between Jacob and the angel is remarkable – it feels almost shocking. It is a sharp reminder that for God to touch us, and allow himself to be touched, costs God. It foreshadows the intimate relationship God will have with the prophets. Does it also foreshadow the intimacy of incarnation? Words like 'incarnation' are Christian terminology, yet it is telling that the Jewish Elie Wiesel writes again, 'God does not wait for man at the end of the road, the termination of exile; he accompanies him there. More than that, He is the road, He is the exile. God holds both ends of the rope, He is present in every extremity, He is every limit. He is part of Jacob as He is part of Esau.

But all too often people fail to realize that the story of Jacob's encounter with God's face does not stop here in chapter 32. After this painful night struggle that has resulted in his wounding – though also his new name – next morning the sun rises. Careful readers of the story of Jacob can notice that this is the first time we read of the sun rising since we were told of its setting more than twenty years before as Jacob approached Bethel.

This new day seems to herald a new future and new possibilities. And the new future is fleshed in reality when Jacob finally meets his brother, Esau, whom he once deceived so bitterly and has feared so long, to be greeted with a graciousness which surprises him. Those words that Jacob uses in response to Esau's welcome perhaps offer the profoundest biblical summary of what reconciliation can and should mean. They so often pass unnoticed – but they are at the heart of this story. 'Accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour.'

The one who has so recently spoken of seeing God face to face at Penuel, is now also able to perceive God in the face of his brother. So Esau, has become a 'holy place' for Jacob, the gateway by which he can meet God. Without this brother, Jacob is incomplete. Esau seems to have accepted the challenge which Jacob was too afraid to accept all those years ago at Bethel.

Jacob's experiences of the previous dark night and this bright morning somehow mysteriously coalesce – there are Jewish traditions that suggest that Jacob's divine assailant at the river crossing was none other than the guardian angel of Esau, or perhaps the guardian angel of the nation of Edom, of which Esau was to be the ancestor. We need to read both episodes together.

That Jacob had to struggle so hard for the blessing, and was wounded in the struggle, is a rightful reminder of how costly reconciliation can – and sometimes should – be. I find it intriguing that the depiction of the scene in the icon somehow conveys a link between

'wrestling' and 'embrace'. As I have already mentioned, this icon deliberately suggests the need for reconciliation in several aspects of life in the Middle East. It is no accident that the icon has chosen to focus on the story of Jacob and Esau for, both in the Bible and in later interpretation, the alienation and reconciliation between these two figures is not simply the story of two brothers – but also portrays the tense and ambiguous history between the nations of Israel and Edom, of which Jacob and Esau were the traditional ancestors. If Israel turns its back on either a relationship with God or a relationship with the foreign nations, for which in rabbinic thought Edom was the archetype, then perhaps it becomes less than Israel.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once commented there must be no 'cheap grace'. Likewise reconciliation if it is to be authentic must never be easy or 'cheap'. Any who wish legitimately to claim the name 'Israel' given to Jacob that night by the river must be prepared to continue the dual and interlocking struggle, 'wrestling' for reconciliation both with God and with their brothers and sisters, with the wider world, and discovering that the 'face' of each illuminates the other. In that struggle is the blessing.

If you take another look at the icon you can realise why the ladder is there as the background to the embrace and reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. I think the icon painter is telling us that it is only when the conflict between Jacob and Esau is reconciled in this way that the ladder really can span from earth to heaven. It is only when human beings can see the face of God in one another that the holy place of God's presence can really be manifested here on earth.

There is a wonderful Middle Eastern story – and it is genuinely not certain whether it comes from a Jewish, Christian or Muslim source – which expresses this with delightful humour. Two brothers worked together on a family farm. One was unmarried and the other married with children. They shared what they grew equally as they always did, produce and profit.

But one day the single brother said to himself, 'You know, it's not right that we should share the produce equally, and the profit too. After all I'm all alone, just by myself and my needs are simple. But there is my poor brother with a wife and all those children.' So in the middle of the night he took a sack of grain from his bin, crept over the field between their houses and dumped it in his brother's bin.

Meanwhile, unknown to him, his brother had the same thought. He said to himself, 'It is not right that we should share produce and profit equally. After all, I am married and I have my wife to look after me and my children for years to come. But my brother has no one to take care of his future.' So he too, in the middle of the night, took to taking a sack of grain from his bin and sneaking across the field to deposit it in his brother's. And both were puzzled for years as to why their supply did not dwindle.

Well, one night it just so happened that they both set out for each other's house at the same time. In the dark they bumped into each other carrying their sacks. Each was startled, but then it slowly dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another. Suddenly the dark sky lit up and a voice from heaven spoke, 'Here at last is the place where I will build my Temple. For where brothers meet in love, there my Presence shall dwell.'

The Old Testament will never again wrestle quite so powerfully with the topic of brotherhood. It is as though it is too painful to do so. Human beings cannot bear so much reality. It is easier for Jacob to travel to Canaan and Esau to Edom rather than live together face to face. But once on a dark night and a sunlit morning we were given a glimpse that we cannot ignore. This blessing will not be taken from us.

Questions for discussion

1. Does the numinous and ambiguous nature of this biblical story attract or repel you? Gerhard Von Rad suggested that the multi-layered nature of the story is part of its richness and fascination. What does this say to us as Christians when we read scripture, particularly Old Testament scripture?

2. What or who do you understand by 'Israel'? Does your reading of this mysterious passage give you any new insight into this question? Does it have any implication at all (or absolutely none) for our Christian reflection on the situation in the Middle East and the Holy Land?

3. Do you agree with the comment 'If Israel turns its back on either a relationship with God or a relationship with the foreign nations... then perhaps becomes less than Israel'? What does it mean to be 'face to face' with God and others? What do you think that means for you, in the context of our contemporary world?

4. With a group of friends and colleagues I worked on the recent Anglican report on Christian Zionism, Land of Promise? The report chose to begin with a reflection on this biblical passage. When sharing an initial draft of the report with a number of readers, we received back the comment from one, 'Why did you begin with this biblical story? Why not choose (for example) the story of God's promise of land and covenant to Abraham, which the writer of the comment thought had a more 'obvious' link? Do you think 'wrestling Jacob's' encounter with God a good starting point or not for reflection on issues such as Christian Zionism? Why do you think this?

Prayers

God of mystery,
strange opponent of our long night,
whether we are near or far,
in difficulty or in danger,
your face is always turned towards us in love and compassion.
Grant us the grace to look upon you,
and to trace your likeness
in the shapes of others,
both lovely and unloved.
Struggle with our fear and shame,
and do not let us go,
until the day breaks,
and you have given us your blessing. Amen

Sometimes faith confidently and easily interprets experience as from God; sometimes only slowly and after much argument with itself and life. And sometimes it simply has to hold on, like the troubled wrestler by the dark river, trusting that when the light breaks it will appear that the imagined enemy was Love all the time. *(Neville Ward)*

Front page photo: www.flickr.com/photos/tarekzein/