

# ‘Encountering God: Jacob’s Dream’

A Sermon preached at Coventry Cathedral and St Mary’s, Warwick on  
Trinity 5 (2014) by Vaughan S Roberts

*Genesis 28: 10-19a*

*Jacob said: ‘This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’*  
(Gen 28: 17a)

At first glance our Old Testament passage resembles a short, self-contained story about one person’s dream-like encounter with God, which on the face of it seems brief and (to be frank) hardly novel. But this concise narrative of Jacob’s divine encounter lifts the lid on three significant ways in which humanity and God interact.

We might easily miss the first of those interactions because it’s hidden in the opening sentence: *Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran*. The protagonist isn’t just setting out on a day trip to the seaside or a bank holiday walk. This is the man who’s deceived his father to obtain a valued parental blessing, swindled his brother by stealing his birth-right and created such murky family politics it would be quite understandable if the hands of God were not only washed and re-washed but cleansed all over with sanitizer as well.

So this is part of a story about two brothers in conflict and we’ve already been there before in the Bible of course – with Cane and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael – and this motif re-occurs through many stories across different cultures and faiths of two brothers in conflict. Indeed, one of Jesus’ most famous stories is about a profligate son (not unlike Jacob) who becomes the prodigal son much to *his* brother’s disgust.

Yet even in this ethically shadowy and morally overcast world, God’s found to be present and not just present but also active. The stairway reaches down and the stairway reaches up. The messengers of God ascend and descend, and even God draws close to the person whose integrity is, at best, dubious – such that Jacob can say: *This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven*.

The second of the divine interactions with humanity comes in the form of what’s been called the ancestral narrative of Israel and we heard it our passage. *The Lord said to Jacob: ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad ... and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring*.

This is not the first time that God makes such a promise. It’s already been made in Genesis chapter 15 to Sarah and Abraham when they were visited by three strangers or three angels. And that divine encounter which has been taken up in Christian art and iconography as meeting with the three-fold nature of God. The aging and childless couple were promised a son – a prophecy that’s greeted by disbelief, humour, astonishment and mockery by the couple themselves.

And yet a son, Isaac, is duly born. And the divine promise is re-affirmed to the adult Isaac in chapter 22 and once more to the next generation, to Jacob, in chapter 28. So in this divine encounter we learn that God isn’t just for one person, at one time, wherever

they happen to lay their head – there’s a bigger story being told and God is an integral part of it.

This promise is one of the reasons why Jacob wakes from his dream and says: *This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.* But we know this promise continues to have serious complications. It’s as if there are still two warring brothers in the Holy Land right now, claiming the legitimacy of their divine father and fighting over their birth-right. The path to the house of God and the gate of heaven is steep and fraught with difficulties, and walking that way is incredibly demanding, which leads us into the third and final divine interaction in this story.

We heard towards the end of our reading: *Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place!’* The use here of the word ‘awesome’ is not meant in the contemporary way to refer to a general sense that something is wonderful or amazing. Rather, it’s tied to that word ‘afraid’. It means an overwhelming sense of reverence that’s close to fear.

So in Jacob’s divine encounter there’s a haunting and troubling sense of God’s presence. Coming close to God isn’t always a comfortable experience. Yes, we believe in a God of love, grace and healing but – as we can see from this week’s traumatic events over Ukraine, in Gaza and with the debate about assisted dying – we live in a difficult and challenging world. Sometimes it’s not always clear what God wishes us to do; God also makes demands upon us; and sincere people of faith (C S Lewis is a good example) will testify that God doesn’t always seem present at times of need. We may all have said at some point: *Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!*

This is Jacob’s dream then, with these three aspects of divine encounter to it – God present in times of conflict seeking reconciliation; God woven into the overarching story of creation; and the sometimes disconcerting presence of God which can be near even when we don’t always expect it. Where does that leave us now as we prepare to move on shortly from the house of the God, the gate of heaven, and continue our journeys into the week ahead?

We know that Jacob is eventually reconciled with his brother Esau and they embrace in chapter 33 of Genesis. The families of the earth have been blessed by the offspring of Jacob, not least in and through the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ reconciling humanity to God. And the God who reaches out to us even in the darkest times will ever seek to draw close to us even if we may not feel ready or worthy. God *will* meet us if we ourselves remain open ...

Finally then, although this story is about *Jacob’s* divine encounter, it’s not just about *one* person meeting the living God. The passage has implications for us collectively as followers of Christ gathered here today. Part of the collective calling of Church, wherever it’s to be found, is to incarnate God’s presence in word and deed – such that we can all say like Jacob: *surely the Lord is in this place, and: this is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.*