

# Loaves, fishes and miracles of another kind

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 2 August, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Karyn Burchell-Thomas

Pentecost 9A

**Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21; Contemporary reading:  
from song *Jacob struggled for a blessing* by Robin Mann.**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

---

Very few, if any, human beings can go through life without some kind of struggle, especially those inner, personal struggles that leave us awake at night wondering what path to take, what decision to make, what voice to heed, what choice to make, knowing that any one will present challenges and none will guarantee the best, or correct, or perfect outcome. Yet, a decision we must make and risks we must take, or the long nights wrestling with the soul will not go away. nor will the problem glaring at us the next morning.

That's where our ethics and philosophies and learning and faith come in. Hopefully together they will not lead us astray. Even doing nothing is, at any time, doing something!

It just does not seem like it at the time. History will show however that our 'non decision' did lead to, or at least support, a certain outcome. There - we've committed to an outcome by default! Sometimes we just have to deal with what we have and aim make the best of it, take responsibility and be an adult.

Although father to numerous children, with two wives and many possessions, Jacob seems to be anything but an adult. He cheated his brother, betrayed his parents, undermined his heritage, and has a general history of cheating and conniving for his own benefit.

Now Jacob is returning to the home of his upbringing, to the land promised to his ancestors and on the way, he must go over old ground, some of which brings memories of God's presence and promise. The closer he gets though, the more concerned he is that his reception might not be friendly, especially as it is his brother, Esau, he will be meeting.

The message Jacob has received is that Esau is coming with an army, or at least enough men to be an army. In true less-than-sincere style, Jacob hedges his bets. Aiming to keep all that is his safe he sets his family and possessions on the other side of the river and sends ahead with gifts to appease Esau. But like our nights of struggle with what decision to make, Jacob cannot sleep.

Throughout the long, dark night Jacob struggles long and hard with a stranger in his midst. Holding his ground Jacob won't be beaten but he doesn't quite win either. It seems to be a battle of two wills. Jacob wants to win - he always wants to win! But Jacob's opponent seems to have another intention.

The opponent strikes Jacob's hip who, quite literally, is brought to his knees. This should certainly lead to the final death blow, but that does not take place. Out of awe - or is it sheer relief - Jacob asks for his opponent to bless him!

No, the old, self-serving Jacob isn't broken yet, but he is somewhat humbled before this inexhaustible, gracious presence. Jacob thus becomes Israel, the one who struggles with God and with humans and prevails.

Not quite a victory for Jacob but recognition that he still stands, even if with a limp, and he has a place and a role to play in history which, despite all seeming efforts to the contrary, will be fulfilled. Not because Jacob, now Israel, is always or even necessarily good, or right, or virtuous, but because Jacob has the blessing and promise of the One who can and will create a wonderful life and world for many generations to come, even out of these questionable beginnings.

This story is not about Jacob, nor even Israel, although the story will hold him and those that follow in the forefront of each chapter. Ultimately it is the story of the One who is the Creator and Sustainer and Lover of Life itself.

Now that makes it a kind of miracle. Because even with all the raw ingredients that do not suggest anything good can come from them, God will make something good of them. It's part of a long line of events, and greater than one human being in their lifetime could ever achieve. Yes a very different kind of miracle to the instant fix some people look for when they really want magic.

I never believed in magic, however tempting, but I do believe in miracles - well this kind I do. I can think of some in my own life that at the time were very ordinary or should I say difficult, challenging, seriously dark, hard and unhappy times, especially but not limited to my childhood. Times, events, encounters, that as I look back I realise there was an inexhaustible gracious presence working through others to help in my time of need, or challenge or stupidity, not solving all the problems, but being there and engaging in life so that I could find my way.

It wasn't about me or any special qualities I might have. It was about God. I don't think I recognised God in those moments - not at the time. I don't think the people who helped me thought of themselves in that way either. But channels of grace they were and I survived, not without some scars, and in time I learned to live and to love too.

When we talk of God being Life's Creator, Sustainer, Lover, Inspirer, empowering and encouraging us and all that lives, we shouldn't be surprised that this may lead to tangible, mysterious, wonder-filled outcomes.

That leads me to the Gospel reading. Matthew takes us up a hill to hear Jesus speaking. It's been a long day and the seeming thousands of people (it says 5,000 men plus more women and children) are there. I'm not concerned whether the number is so exact, because that's a lot and it hints at an army being formed, but not the kind that is armed to kill and maim rather to love and free. (Of course future events in history will want to reinterpret that calling and develop the story differently, but that was not nor ever is to be the true intention of taking on the mission of the Christ. It's always, always, about love and freedom.)

The journey began when Jesus was already tired. Coming to this deserted place was meant to be to rest. But the crowds followed and so their needs were attended to. Now it was late, everyone was hungry, away from home and no-one seemed to be moving.

Unprepared for such an occasion Jesus' disciples suggested they be encouraged to go. But the Inexhaustible, Gracious Presence suggested otherwise. Jesus asked for what they had ... five loaves and two fish was maybe just enough to feed Jesus and the disciples.

Now what followed is most certainly deemed a great miracle. For some it was a miracle of multiplication - maybe just a bit of magic - when five loaves and two fish became - what, hundreds of loaves and hundreds of fish.

For others it was another kind of miracle - a miracle of community - when everyone there shared with each other the little they carried in their pockets and pouches; and what do you know, there was more than enough for all! Again, something greater than any one can do on their own has been achieved and not just for the day, but for generations to come as people recalled the miracle of community' the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 plus.

The 12 baskets of food left over suggests either a seriously generous miracle of multiplication or a surprising amount of humble sharing ... or perhaps it even stands as a sign that regardless of what the current situation looks like historically, there is a future for the 12 tribes of Israel.

Yes, there were numerous generations to come for Jacob - oh, I mean Israel!

Today, as I look around the world, I see signs of crowds in deserted places without the facilities they need to care for their health in a pandemic-ridden world; or without a place to live in, their home washed away by this weeks' floods; or without an income, their employer closing down because they couldn't keep going unable to ensure everyone's health or that there would be customers.

Or people trying to make their presence known to those in power, pleading that Black Lives Matter. Or those struggling for their voice to be heard as their human rights are trampled. Or those who for generations have been deemed homeless, without a nation. And those with pride, standing with dignity, yet aware they have for so long not been valued as human beings.

The list goes on. It's never-ending and when I think about it I feel completely helpless. Even smaller than my 145 centimetres and not at all equipped to do a thing. What can one person do, really?

There are times I would love a little magic to solve all of these problems. But that's not how it can be, not because of some harsh edict, but because for there to be a future for us all, we all need to be part of its making.

Just like Jacob learning to be Israel, limping but alive and ready to take some responsibility for the future, encouraged and with more faith in what is possible because of the Inexhaustible, Gracious Presence that is in his life - and in ours.

Just like the disciples learning it's about more than what is seen and the crowd learning that there is more that they can achieve together than when thinking only of themselves.

The outcomes of each of these miracles of another kind were not about God overcoming everybody's problems, a quick fix, a ready result. Rather they were about helping us recognise that we are not in this alone and that together amazing, wonderful things are possible.

And no it's not, it never is about us, it is about the Inexhaustible, Gracious Presence here with us, helping us find our way, holding before us the vision that there will be a day when the long list of individuals and crowds in deserted places crying out for healing, for love, recognition and respect will be a thing of the past because together we have found a way.

Why does God bother? Because God loves us!

In the meantime, however small, however faulty, however meagre, however misguided, however unprepared, we have a role and a place in the story that is the unfolding of the vision held before us by the Inexhaustible, Gracious Presence.

May we live out our small part in the current chapter with humility and importantly, faith, that love may have its way. Amen