

‘Bargaining with God!’

I know that most (but not all) of you will have celebrated **Covenant** by now, but allow me to share some thoughts on one of those stories from the Old Testament that make me both smile and seriously ponder! I suppose the fact that I’ve been doing a lot of negotiating recently in my private life, has prompted me to reflect on the whole subject of bargaining.

I’m a great haggler! From most of the cars we’ve purchased, to markets in The Gambia and Kenya (where they expect you to haggle) to furniture shops and stores of all descriptions – I have love good bargaining sessions. And one of Joan’s favourite programmes on TV, *Bargain Hunt*, has become one of mine, too. So you’ll not be surprised to find that I immediately thought of the story of **Jacob, in Genesis Chapters 27-28** who – after cheating his brother Esau out of his birthright – has to flee to his uncle Laban. The story is well worth reading, as it’s a beautiful, witty account of how God uses a real slippery character, which is what Jacob was.

On the way to Laban, Jacob stops for the night and has a dream – which has since been popularised as “**Jacob’s Ladder**” – in which he has a vision of heaven and a promise from God that Jacob will be the father of a great nation, that God will be with him wherever he goes and that He will keep him safe.



There are two essential ingredients in the story that have much to say to us.

The first concerns **God’s promise to Jacob**. This covenant starts with God. God does not rebuke Jacob for his deception, or for any of his other sins, for that matter. Why? Because God is *gracious* – he accepts us *as we are*, or as Paul would put it some 1500 years later, ‘*Christ died for us whilst we were yet sinners*’.

But it’s the second part, concerning **Jacob’s response to God**, that I find most intriguing. It would be lovely – romantic, even – to see the story of Jacob at Bethel as a parable of a sinner confronted by God, hearing his word of forgiveness, coming to his senses, and promising (with God’s help) to live a worthier life in the future. And I have to say that the hymn we often sing at Covenant services (‘O God of Bethel’ – *Singing the Faith* 475) is a very idealised interpretation of the Old Testament story!

However, this is not what happens! What does happen is perhaps closer to our own experience. Look at **vs. 20-22 again**:

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “**If** God will be with me, **and** will keep me in this way that I go, **and** will give me bread to eat **and** clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, **then** the Lord shall be my God...” (my italics) and so on. True, he offers to make a tithe, to give God a tenth of all he has (which a lot of people today seem find every excuse under the sun to avoid doing), but the whole tone of his response seems to be very grudging, or limited at the very least.



But the whole point is: **Jacob's response was to offer what he could at that moment**. It was the best he could manage at that time. And it was acceptable!! And the whole point of the covenant which you and I renew each year is that **God doesn't just want our good intentions**; he can use, and wants to use, what we have to offer now.

Of course, it's part of a process of being transformed by God – in becoming more Christ-like – however slow that process may seem to us to be. It happened with Jacob, and if you read the rest of his journey, you'll find that he does indeed grow in honesty, humility and in faith. Very gradually and painfully, but he gets there in the end!

That is why we can say these awe-inspiring words that our in our Covenant Service – because we know that God accepts us as we are, soiled and imperfect though we may be, and that provided we offer ourselves, just as we are, then we can indeed be the raw material out of which God can build his kingdom.

A Prayer: Loving God, forgive our foolishness and near-sightedness for not trusting you enough. Help us to realise that you love us just as we are, and help us – by your grace – to grow into the people you long for us to be, in Christ's name and for His sake, Amen.

Every blessing to you all,

Barrie Tabraham

Resources/Good News

Armed Forces Local Preacher Scheme

Joe Navoka has become the first member of the armed forces to be admitted to the office of Local Preacher in the Methodist Church having participated in the new Armed Forces Local Preacher Scheme. You can read Joe's story here [Armed Forces Local Preacher Scheme](#)

Big Garden Birdwatch - 26-28th January 2024

Big Garden Birdwatch by the RSPB is the world's largest garden wildlife survey. Every year, hundreds of thousands of nature lovers take part, helping to build a picture of how garden birds are faring.

For more information and to find out how to take part have a look at [Big Garden Birdwatch](#)