

What were the messages?

Gen 28.10-19 / John 1.51

The feast of St Michael and All Angels: so let's think about that story of Jacob's ladder we hear about today. He sees angels going up and down it. Now angels are messengers - so what was the message going up and down? We hear a bit of what it might have been in the words God speaks. But I think we need to exercise a bit more imagination than that, when we put this story into its context.

You will remember that Jacob has a twin brother - in fact the first born, who is called Esau. Because he was born first, he had all the first-born rights, but he sells them for a bowl of stew. Esau is in some ways an attractive character - a natural, get-on-with-life kind of bloke. But he doesn't take his responsibilities and privileges seriously. We read that he upset his parents by marrying foreign women - Judith and Basemath. They weren't worried about his having two wives - that was OK - but they were Hittites. So here was this chap who had little thought for the traditions that Isaac wanted to hand down to him, and who didn't have any thought about maintaining the distinctiveness of the revelation God had given to his ancestors. And what is more, he got to hate his brother Jacob

That wasn't so surprising. Jacob had conned him out of the birthright with the stew. And when Isaac was getting very old, he (with the connivance of his mother Rebekah, who disapproved of Esau's lifestyle) again tricked someone - this time his father - by pretending to be Esau. You can see where Jacob's anger and hatred came from. So he is out to kill Jacob. But, being a kindly son, he says that he will not do it until Isaac has died - there is no point in upsetting the old man.

So Rebekeh tells Jacob to get out of it fast, whilst he can. She tells Isaac that Jacob ought to go and get a proper wife from their own people, and not be like that awful Esau, and Isaac buys her argument. So Jacob, at the point of having this dream is on his escape journey. And it is a deeply symbolic journey - he is going precisely the way Abraham had come all those years before. He was going to Haran, which is where Abraham had lived before he heard the call of God to go to a promised land. I wonder what Jacob - who *did* have a sense of God's promises, feel as he was on his way? The only way those promises could be fulfilled would be if he came back to Canaan - but would he ever be able to, in safety? The whole of the story of God's dealings with his ancestors was in the balance. Would the promise be kept?

It is in that context that he lies down to sleep for the last time in what he believed was the promised land. But he was about to leave it, to be a foreigner himself in Babylon. And he dreams about a ladder. But just remember how the ladder is described. The end of it is in heaven, and it is set up to earth. That is the exact reverse of what the Babylonians had done so long before - they had built the ladder up to

heaven, the attempt to get there under their own steam. We know about that - it is the story of the tower of Babel. What we don't realise, because we don't read it in the original language, is that that is what Jacob calls this place. It must be the gate of heaven - and the word that translates is simply 'Babel'. The difference between the tower of Babel and this Babel, is that the ladder comes from heaven to earth, and not the other way round.

So what are the messages going up and down the ladder? You can begin to feel the things that Jacob must have been feeling. He was afraid of the future, and whether the promises were coming to nothing. The angels took that message of fear and distrust. And no doubt Jacob was aware of the less-than-perfect ways in which he had got into the mess he was in. OK, Esau wasn't doing things right, but neither was he. It is not a coincidence that his name means 'the supplanter'. So the angels took his guilt, his shame at the things he had done.

And they bring back with them a message of comfort and forgiveness, of assurance that God does not fail people like both Esau and Jacob have in their different ways failed him. There is a future for Jacob, despite his past, and it is one which is far more than personal. Through him God will establish his land - the erez Yisrael, and from that will come a blessing for the whole earth. He must go, but with God's promise to be fulfilled, he will also return, and things will take their proper course. He has to go back to Haran, he has to leave, to let go, with trust that God is not confined to this particular bit of land. God will be with him in his going and in his returning.

And so Jacob wakes from the dream, thinking about things very differently. He has had an encounter with God, a call to follow just as Abraham had had one all those years before. Strangely, it was a call to make the exact reverse journey. But with God you can never go back to where you were. Even if the journey seems to be in a circle, the journey is actually moving on. So he says this place is the true Babel, the place of meeting between heaven and earth. And the city nearby is also given a new name. Instead of Luz, it is to be known as Bethel - the House of God. He is to be remade, and will himself one day take a new name - Jacob the supplanter will become Israel. And one day, an Israelite called Jesus was to tell his friends that they would see a new ladder connecting heaven and earth, bringing God's hope and promise to everyone. And that ladder would be himself. As the hymn says:

Hallelujah to Jesus who died on the tree, and has raised up a ladder of mercy for me.

With the knowledge of that ladder, we also can make our journeys, and know that in God's good time, all will be well.