

Dear Friends

This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:17).

Do you have a book at your bedside? Many of us do – I have far too many. The early Methodists were sure to have two books at their bedside – the Bible and *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. John and Charles Wesley are perhaps best-known, respectively, for their preaching and hymn-writing. What is less known is that, in his earlier life, Charles was a formidable travelling-preacher and that, also in his earlier life, John was a hymn-writer and a translator of hymns. I am going to mention two hymns relating to the Patriarch, Jacob. The first hymn is a translation by John, the second is commonly thought to be Charles' greatest ever work – but it's too much to do all in one go, so I am going to do one part this month and one part next month.

John Wesley was a brilliant linguist. It was taken for granted that a scholar of his day would know Latin and Classical Greek, as well as French. As a Church of England clergyman, John was also well-versed in the Hebrew and Hellenistic Greek. On his journey to Georgia, John set about learning German and, in order to reach out to settlers of other nationalities, during his time in the colony he learned enough Spanish and Italian to translate a Spanish hymn and conduct services. However, with regard to his language-skills, his greatest achievement was translating 33 hymns from German, including two from Gerhard Tersteegen.

Lo, God is here! Let us adore,
How awe-inspiring is this place!
Let all within us feel His power,
And silent bow before His face.
Who know His power, His grace who prove,
Serve Him with awe, with reverence love.
(*Hymns and Psalms*, 531)

The best hymns, like this one, have deep roots in the Bible and here both Tersteegen and Wesley are remembering an incident from the life of Jacob. Jacob was the younger of twins. By the custom of the time, his elder brother, Esau, was entitled to a greater inheritance of the family estate (two-thirds as opposed to one-third) and their father Isaac's special last blessing. One day, when Esau returned from one of his regular hunting expeditions he was so hungry that he sold his position in the family, 'his birth-right', to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew (what older Bibles called 'a mess of pottage'). Encouraged in the deceit by their mother, Rebekah, smooth operator Jacob also managed to convince his ailing and blind father that he was the elder son, Esau, and receive his blessing (see Genesis 27:1-28:9).

Esau decided that after Isaac's death he would kill Jacob but Rebekah warned her favourite younger son and told him to go and take refuge with his Uncle Laban (Genesis 27:41-45). So Jacob set out for Haran and after a long day of travelling, when the sun had set, using a stone as a pillow (the Bible does not say he did not put anything softer over the top of it), he settled down for the night. While it is easy to get carried away with the dream of the ladder the key part is the God reiterated the promises that he had made to Abraham and Isaac saying, 'I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring' (Genesis 28:13-14). And so, 'When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven"' (Genesis 28:16-17). Jacob called this place 'Bethel'.

I don't suppose you remember many sermons – but don't worry, I don't either. But just occasionally something sticks in your mind. This happened to me in about 1992 when my revered college tutor, Revd A. Raymond George, preached at St Agnes on the text 'This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven'. One word of the sermon made a lasting impression on me: 'Outside'. The house of God is outside.

Not many people will have been more sentimentally attached to their home chapel than I was – I was deeply saddened when it closed in February 1987, all the more so as conjunctivitis prevented me from attending the last service when I had planned to be free on the Sunday evening to be able to attend. I was the fourth generation Haley to attend the chapel. My Dad used to say that before the Second World War, when it was fashionable for Bible texts to be painted behind the pulpit that the text at the front read (from the *Authorised Version*) 'this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' The text was true – but the inference that Belmont Wesleyan Chapel, Devonport, was somehow the 'house of God' was not true, neither is it true for any other place of Christian worship. After all, 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands' (Acts 17:24).

There are times and places that we set aside to do certain things. It does not mean that we cannot do them at other times or in other places but we have given them over for that purpose. Have we been disappointed not to be able to meet our Christian friends during the period of these restrictions? I have and, like me, I expect you have been too. Have we been disappointed not to be able to meet with God during the period of these restrictions? Not at all! For while there is something special about Christians gathering together to worship in the name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Saviour, there is never a time when or a place where we cannot come into the awesome presence of God, when we can feel his power, when we can bow in humble adoration and, knowing his power and experiencing his grace, be ready to love and to serve him.

God bless

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