

Dear Friends

***Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.'
But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'
The man asked him, 'What is your name?'
'Jacob,' he answered. (Genesis 32:26-27).***

Last month, we began looking at the life of the Patriarch, Jacob. Twice Jacob had dealt treacherously with his elder twin-brother, Esau. Memorably, Jacob had deceived his aged, blind father, Isaac into giving him his fatherly blessing, by dressing up in his brother's clothes and covering his hands with goat-skins – it made him smell like Esau and feel like Esau but it did not make him sound like Esau. On more than one occasion, Isaac asked Jacob 'who are you?' Each time, Jacob told his father that he was Esau. Fearing Esau's revenge, Jacob fled to his uncle, Laban. On the way, he had his famous dream of the ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending and we looked at a hymn translated by John Wesley, 'Lo, God is here! Let us adore' (*Hymns and Psalms* 531).

Unlike Esau and Jacob, the Wesley brothers were not twins. Indeed, John and Charles Wesley had an older brother, Samuel, who was named after their father. They also had seven sisters. Sadly, there were probably nine or more other children who did not survive through infancy. When he was born, about a week before Christmas 1707, Charles was a very sickly child. In the early weeks of his life he neither cried nor opened his eyes. His parents thought that he would not survive infancy, so much so that when he did survive they were not exactly sure of his birthday – but it is always considered to be 18 December 1707. In his early life, Charles followed in the footsteps of his elder brothers but in one important matter he edged in front of John. Through their Church of England upbringing, through their parents' Puritan roots, and through their encounters with the German Pietists, principally the Moravians, John and Charles Wesley came to believe that there was a definite spiritual experience of 'conversion' that would be coupled with assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Both brothers wanted this desperately and talked with the Moravians and read the Bible and wrestled in prayer for several months. On Pentecost Sunday 1738, Charles finally rejoiced, 'I believe!' Of course, in one sense there had probably never been a time when he didn't believe (in theory) but this, like John's more famous heart-warming experience at Aldersgate Street three days later, was the time when his belief became personal trust and theoretical knowledge became practical experience. Very soon after he wrote two of his greatest hymns 'Where shall my wondering soul begin' (*Hymns and Psalms* 706) and 'And can it be?' (*Hymns and Psalms* 216). There may have been a lingering doubt about his natural date of birth – Charles was in no doubt about his spiritual date of birth – 21 May 1738.

Before his personal Pentecost, Charles had been something of an indifferent poet. Like John, he had been classically trained and writing verse had been part and parcel of his education but he had not shown a particular aptitude for poetry. However, with the assurance of faith, Christian praise flowed like a torrent from his pen – on average he wrote two or three hymns a week, some with many more verses than we know today. By common consent, one of the greatest if not the greatest of his 'hymns' is 'Come, O Thou Traveller unknown' (*Hymns and Psalms* 434), based on the incident of Jacob's wrestling and subsequent blessing at Peniel (Genesis 32:26-32). I say 'hymn' in inverted commas because some scholars think that Charles never intended this poem to be sung – in my first circuit, at Mitcham, Surrey, we still had quite a good choir and we would sometimes have the hymn on a Sunday evening but even I have not sung it in a service for more than 30 years now!

Come, O Thou Traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,

And I am left alone with Thee
With Thee all night I mean to stay
And wrestle till the break of day.

It is commonly accepted that the 'man' is either an angel from God or a theophany. A theophany is the idea that God could appear in human form before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ at Bethlehem. However, we understand the biblical passage, Charles Wesley skilfully weaves into the narrative of Jacob, the Christian's experience, which he would have known all too well, of showing such resolve before God (wrestling in prayer) as to know God's blessing, not least in assurance of forgiveness. The climax of the hymn centres not on Jacob's need to confess his own name (there is no room for deception here) but on Jacob's desire to know the name of the one with whom he wrestles. It is a glimpse into the context of true worship – we have to accept the reality of ourselves and to experience the revealed truth about God. Almost despairing, Wesley says, 'Wrestling, I will not let Thee go / till I Thy name, Thy nature know'. Suddenly he breaks out in rejoicing:

'Tis love! 'Tis love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear the whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
Pure, universal love Thou art;
To me, to all, Thy mercies move:
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

I know Thee, Saviour, who Thou art,
Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend;
Nor wilt Thou with the night depart,
But stay and love me to the end;
Thy mercies never shall remove:
Thy nature and they name is Love.

The historical pattern of the conversion of the Wesley brothers is something Methodists hold dear. It is because we want everyone to share the experience of knowing Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour.

God bless

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