**The Swiss Church in London**

**Sunday service, 4 July 2021**

**Organ prelude**

**Welcome**

*“We look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” (2 Cor 4:18)*

*„Wir sehen nicht auf das Sichtbare, sondern auf das Unsichtbare; denn was sichtbar ist, das ist zeitlich; was aber unsichtbar ist, das ist ewig.“*

*„Ainsi nous regardons non pas à ce qui est visible, mais à ce qui est invisible, car les réalités visibles sont passagères et les invisibles sont éternelles.”*

Good morning everyone.

It is a wonderful world we live in, and yet in so many ways deeply troubled and frustrating. Things don’t always seem to add up. There are circumstances that make us wonder why God doesn’t seem to help, or at least, relax the pain.

How can we reconcile the often messy, tearful, unpredictable nature of our existence with our idea of a nurturing and caring God? Sometimes, perhaps, we can’t. Some things will be forever unresolved, some pains are never going to go away, some questions will never find their answer.

And yet, every now and then when we find ourselves taking a deep breathe, we can feel a gentle vibration in the background, a different reality shining through. Moments of peace and thoughts of hope are within our reach.

Let us today, in this coming hour, make space for the invisible, for the gentle vibration of peace. Together we can turn into an ever louder hum that we can take away with us into our lives, no matter what moves us deep inside right now.

**Prayer**

God of pilgrims, God of our ancestors

We have travelled by train or bus, by foot or bike to our beautiful church today

to be united with our friends,

to find peace in your presence,

to be touched by the music we are going to hear,

to marvel at the beauty of this building.

You know each one of us by name,

even if no one else knows how to call us.

You know what moves us deep inside, our regrets, our hopes, our anger, our joy,

even if these remain hidden from everyone else.

Loving God,

within us and around us,

stir up our lost dreams and most secret hopes.

Let them resurface to shape our being in this world.

You are the God of dreams and hope;

in you there is no beginning and no end.

In you, time and space have a different meaning.

Take us on a journey to discover your reality,

and be our comfort,

now and all the days of our lives.

Amen

**Reading Genesis 32:23-32**

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and his daughter and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So, Jacob was left alone, and somebody wrestled with him till daybreak. When the person saw that Jacob could not be overpowered, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as they wrestled. The person said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

The person asked him, “What is your name?” - “Jacob,” he answered.

Then the person said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore, to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon.

**Sermon**

*Who is who?*

I have to begin with a confession. I find the who is who of the biblical foremothers and forefathers utterly confusing. Who is whose daughter, father, husband, mother again? How are Sara, Rachel, Isaac, Hagar and all the others related? Jacob is one of those figures I have to look up the family relations regularly. Unsurprisingly! He is married to two women, has thirteen children with four, and has all the rights of a first-born son although he is the second-born. Clearly the traditional nuclear family as we have been idealising it for the past decades is not very biblical.

According to the Book of Genesis, Jacob is the son of Isaac and Rebecca, and the grandson of Abram and Sara. He has a slightly older twin brother, Esau. As a young man Jacob tricked his almost blind father Isaac into giving him the firstborn blessing instead of Esau, hence depriving his brother of his rights. Jacob is said to have twelve sons and one daughter by four women, his two wives Lea and Rachel and their maids Bilah and Zilpah. The twelve tribes of Israel were later named after their sons. Jacob preferred Rachel’s sons Joseph and Benjamin which caused tension within the family eventually culminating in Joseph’s older brothers selling Joseph into slavery. We know the story… the Israelites were held slaves by the Pharaoh in Egypt for generations before being led into freedom by Moses.

So, Jacob is a very central figure in the founding myth of Israel in which the Church of Christ is firmly rooted.

*Jacob’s wrestle with Somebody*

Jacob’s wrestle by the river Jabbok is an odd story. Odd because there is some confusion around the other person’s identity. Odd also because of Jacob’s stubborn behaviour, and the injury he carries away from that night that will mark him for the rest of his life. The encounter between the two is almost dreamlike.

Let us explore the context of the story. Jacob had fled his father-in-law Laban’s land to return to his own homeland, together with Lea and Rachel, Laban’s daughters and all of Laban’s grandchildren. Laban was furious. “How dare you taking away my daughters and my grandchildren by force without giving me a chance to kissing them goodbye!” he shouted at Jacob when he caught up with them. Nevertheless, they decide to make a covenant. Jacob promises to treat Laban’s daughters fairly and not to take any more wives. They both promise to stay away from each other and leave each other in peace. Laban kisses his children goodbye and returns home.

Yet another obstacle awaits them on their journey: Jacob’s twin brother Esau. Esau is still furious at his younger brother for stealing his firstborn blessing. So, in the middle of the night, in order to raise as little attention as possible, Jacob brings his wives and children, the entire household and kettle on to the other side of the river Jabbok. He was left behind alone. Out of nowhere an unknown person appears and the two are wrestling throughout the night until daybreak. Later on, Jacob calls the place where they have wrestled Peniel, which means “I saw God face to face”. However, his opponent never really reveals their name, so it remains unclear for us readers who we are dealing with here. God? An angel? A common person? Perhaps even Esau?

For Jacob however the identity of the person he wrestles with seems very clear. He wrestles with God. He wants something. He wants a blessing, and he does not let go until the blessing is granted in the early hours of the next day. Jacob is incredibly stubborn. He goes through life demanding, turning events to his advantage, even forcing blessings. “Bless me, or I will not let go!”, he says.

It’s kind of annoying, because in all fairness, shouldn’t blessings come to us when we least expect it, to people who live a peaceful life? And here is a person who does things that are just not very nice. He betrays his closest family. He takes away a man’s daughters and grandchildren without giving him a chance to say goodbye. He goes and gets what he needs, he struggles on and does not let go. And not only does he get away with it, no, the person wo struggles with him at the river Jabbok even renames him Israel. Jacob is Israel. God’s own people is named after him.

*Go and get your blessings*

The story of Jacob’s wrestle by the river Jabbok doesn’t quite fit in with today’s values. Somewhere along the line the Church began to teach submission and restraint as fundamental Christian values – quite the opposite of Jacob’s behaviour! Surely, blessings shouldn’t be given to people who betray their family! We don’t argue and struggle with God until we get what we want.

Or perhaps we should. Perhaps here is a lesson we can learn – an unexpected lesson, a not very churchy sounding lesson. Go and get your blessings! Tell God what you want, what you need. Tell people around you what you expect, what you deserve, what you are entitled to. This is not about being disrespectful or arrogant. This is about knowing our worth and acknowledging that we are children of God. We are a blessing, and we deserve to be blessed.

Of course, there are the Trumps of this world who are taking it too far, grabbing everything for themselves, thinking of their own advantage only and feeling entitled to own the world. But most people are not like that. Most people deserve better. Most people are too submissive, too humble thinking that they already have their fair share. We deserve to be seen and heard. We deserve respect. We deserve God’s blessing purely because we exist. So, let’s be more like Jacob, go and get your blessing!

Yet Jacob’s story doesn’t end on an exclusively jolly note. Alongside his blessing that he struggles so hard for, as his being renamed Israel, Jacob also gets a hip injury which makes him limp the rest of his life. It is an odd story with an odd ending. I read Jacob’s hip injury as God setting boundaries to prevent Jacob from hubris. Perhaps it is God’s way of saying: You are Israel. You are blessed multiple times. What more do you want now? Go and use your blessings to serve my people. Go and be my servant on earth. I elevated you, despite of all your flaws; now it is your turn to elevate others.

Go and get your blessings, hold on to God and be demanding, for you are worth it. Do so with a humble and grateful heart, and the blessings will be more than you can ever count.

Amen

**Announcements:**

* I am saddened to announce that Serenella Bertin has passed away in the night from Thursday to Friday. A memorial service for Albert and Serenella will be held in Spring 2022.
* There will be a church service in Endell Street in Sunday, 1 August church service, to mark Swiss National Day. Please sign up for the service as numbers may be limited, depending on government guidelines.

**Prayers of Intercession**

Healing God,

you are the source of all goodness, generosity and love.

We thank you for opening the hearts of many to those who are fleeing for their lives.

Help us now to open our arms in welcome, and to reach out our hands in support.

That the desperate may find new hope, and lives torn apart be restored.

Deliver us from a world without justice and a future without mercy.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, who fled persecution at his birth

and at his last triumphed over death.

*Kyrie eleison*

Loving God,

Thank you for empowering us with your Holy Spirit.

Grant us today the wisdom and the courage to stand up for ourselves and to believe in our worth. Elevate those who underestimate themselves and who struggle to believe that they are worth of your blessings.

Give us the strength to face the day and to see the many blessings that it contains. Give us the courage to walk on, no matter how long the path, and fill our hearts and thoughts with peace and gratitude.

*Kyrie eleison*

And in a moment of silence, we will give space to our own personal prayers and especially pray for those who are most in need of blessings and encouragement right now.

*Silence*

**Lord’s Prayer**

Unser Vater im Himmel,

geheiligt werde dein Name.

Dein Reich komme.

Dein Wille geschehe,

wie im Himmel, so auf Erden.

Unser tägliches Brot gib uns heute,

und vergib uns unsre Schuld,

wie auch wir vergeben unseren Schuldigern.

Und führe uns nicht in Versuchung,

sondern erlöse uns von dem Bösen.

Denn dein ist das Reich

und die Kraft

und die Herrlichkeit

in Ewigkeit.

Amen.

**Blessing**

May the living God be by your side, no matter how long the path. May the Lord look upon you gently, soften your heart and make you whole.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Que le Seigneur te bénisse et te garde! Que le Seigneur fasse briller sur toi son visage, qu’il se penche vers toi! Que le Seigneur tourne vers toi son visage, qu’il t’apporte la paix!

Gott segne dich und behüte dich; Gott lasse sein Angesicht leuchten über dir und sei dir gnädig; Gott hebe sein Angesicht über dich und gebe dir Frieden.

Amen