

Sermons at the All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 19th October 2025

Bible passages: Genesis 32:22-31 and Luke 18:1-8

Wrestling with God.

"I will not let you go, *until* you bless me!"

Bothering the judge.

"Grant me justice against my opponent!"

The Bible readings we've heard today are about people who **will not let go**. They are outrageously committed, determined where others with better sense or a clearer understanding of polite society might give up.

The strange, symbolic account of Jacob wrestling with... who... God..? an angel..? comes at a turning point in Jacob's life. You don't need to remember the whole story, but it's worth remembering Jacob was returning to the home of his youth, rightly frightened of justice from the brother he'd cheated.

It's at times like this, times of transition, uncertainty, fear... times of a coming reckoning, that we might come face to face with the things we usually hide from. The things about ourselves, and our own actions, we'd prefer not to look at. Maybe face to face with the reality of God.

The story of Jacob wrestling with God speaks to all of us who've faced these uncontrollable moments of change in our own lives.

PAUSE

Then we come to Jesus' story, a parable, a story told to get at some truth about God. Here's a woman who's been through the worst moments of change in her own life. First her husband has died. Her companion, her provider, her protection, probably the man she loved and trusted, has died. And someone has taken advantage of her unprotected state and done her an injustice.

Jacob, and the widow. One a key figure of the Jewish and Christian story, the other an illustration from a parable. Jacob and the widow: holding on in challenging times, a woman and a man who refuse to give up.

PAUSE

Who are the other characters in these stories, and who do they represent?

At first, Jacob thinks he's wrestling with a man. It's a surreal, dream-like event, but it's not a dream, because it's intensely physical. Wrestling all night with an unknown adversary, at some point, Jacob seems to realise his opponent isn't human.

This opponent is someone who can bless him: and Jacob's fight turns from a struggle for survival into a refusal to let go, until he's blessed.

The blessing comes as a name. *Jacob* was the name given by his parents, but his new name *Israel* describes what he's been doing: wrestling with God. That 'el' part of the name is the word for God.

Israel means something like 'he holds on to God', or 'he struggles with God', or (because words often have two meanings) the subject of the name might be God: Israel could mean 'God prevails' or 'God contends'.

Either meaning works, in the context of the story. Jacob wrestles with God, and doesn't give up. God prevails in Jacob's life, and Jacob attempts to give glory to God by the way he lives the rest of his life.

And in the light of day, Jacob's conclusion about his opponent, is: 'I have seen God face to face'. The encounter leaves him with a limp, a physical marker of such a life-changing event. He is never the same again. He is *more* than he was before.

PAUSE

In contrast with the story of Jacob, who had this life-changing encounter with God, the widow in Jesus' story is facing an un-just, and lazy, judge. Jesus doesn't ask us to see God in this caricature of the useless judge. He asks us to see a model for ourselves, in the persistent widow. If an unjust judge will listen to a woman who never gives up, how much more will our loving Father listen to us, he asks.

PAUSE

What does it mean, for you, and for me, to be like Jacob, to be like this woman?

Jacob was afraid, but ready for action.

The woman was ignored, but wouldn't give up.

Jacob wrestled all night, which sounds like a pretty awful experience.

The widow kept returning to a powerful man who couldn't be bothered.

Jacob gained understanding as he fought.

The woman kept on going in the face of disdain.

Jacob asked that his reward would be a blessing.

The widow asked simply for justice.

Jacob was blessed, far beyond his imagining.

The woman was given justice.

PAUSE

And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

PAUSE

What are we being asked to learn, through these two stories about being persistent in prayer? How do we connect these stories from long ago, to our lives here in Luxembourg today?

Firstly, the 'need to pray always, and not to lose heart' hasn't changed since the times of Jacob and Jesus. We may even find it harder, because in their day they were surrounded by others who believed in the power of prayers, who would spend time and effort asking God, or the gods, for blessings and justice.

That's not our setting. People around us, we ourselves, have other routes to good things, other ways to get justice. We're grateful for this kind of security, but does it stop us from turning quickly to God? Our need to pray always, not to lose heart in calling out to God, becomes muted by things like reliance on our education, our governments, healthcare, our justice systems – all good things, but these days we can see how precarious our safe governments can be. War and political oppression can be seen all around the world, and some of us have already left one country because war and political oppression have reached our homeland.

Perhaps being in this time of transition, this sense that we have to face some uncomfortable truths about our society, may make us more able to turn to God, to pray always, to not treat God as a nice little addition to an already thriving life.

The underlying truth of Creation is not that humans are in charge, however we like to think we are. Instead, as always, the Creator God is in charge, and how blessed we are that, like Jacob, he's our Creator God!

We don't come to him expecting to be turned away, like the widow to the unjust judge. We come to him with an extraordinary boldness, like Jacob who gripped God in his arms and wouldn't let go.

In these stories of Jacob and the woman, God gives us permission to hold on fiercely, to ask annoyingly, to cry out to him day and night.

We might only feel brave enough, desperate enough, to do that, in times of change and transition. But let's be honest. *Those times* are now. There are challenges as old certainties fade, but there is also this blessing. We remember that we can't rely on ourselves and our institutions to see everything right.

So we remember God's blessing on the one who wrestles with him, we remember Jesus' insistence on unstoppable prayer.

PAUSE

Let's bow our heads and pray:

Father God, teach us persistent prayer. Teach us to cry out to you, day and night, for others, for our world, for Luxembourg, for ourselves. In the power of your Holy Spirit, keep us holding on to you.

Amen