

## Sermon for Sunday 17th July 2022

Gen 28:10-17 Jacob's Dream at Bethel (NIV)

John 4:19-26 (NIV) Samaritan worship

Here we have two quite different readings - Jacob's dream at Bethel, and Jesus discussing places of worship with the Samaritan woman. Let's take a look at each of these, with a view to addressing a common theme: if our church is to be an "inside out church", as discussed in last week's sermon, where will we be doing it?

Let's start with Jacob.

Jacob was in trouble. Being in trouble, he did what many people do: he ran away. What is he running from? In this case, his brother Esau - who was understandably very angry with him. Why? Because Jacob just nicked his inheritance- the blessing due to a firstborn - from their father Isaac. There is no way that you so could get these back, even though he saw was the first born, and so, yes, Esau was very angry and Jacob did a very typical thing - he ran away. So, he left Beersheba and he set out for Harran.

Now, Bethel is about 100 kilometres from Beersheba, which is about a full day of travel on a fast camel. It's reasonable to assume, of course, when you're running away, you try and get as far as you can on that first day. So he's had a full day of travel on a camel ,and he's understandably very tired.

The place he has arrived at is "just another place", at least as far as he is concerned. He may be aware that his Grandfather Abraham had also raised a pillar to God in that general area, in remembrance of a an event in Abraham's life. Pillars were often placed as monuments to events, or agreements, within

the Old Testament - it was quite a common practise at the time. In fact, beyond the end of this reading, Jacob himself places a pillar in this place as a reminder that God was here - that he met with God here.

So, we have a very tired Jacob. He is so tired that he's happy to use a stone as a pillow. Now, they were used to using stone pillows, and

sleeping on the ground, but can you imagine using a stone as a pillow? Just for a moment, I want you to put your head on your fist - just lean it over like this - now, it gets uncomfortable quite quickly doesn't it? Can you imagine doing that with a stone? He may not wake up with a hangover, but he certainly would have the headache of one! That gives you an idea of just how tired he is at the end of this day, dog tired, camel tired even? He was certainly tired of sitting on that camel!

So, here he is, he's tired, he has this dream. He meets God. Meeting God is a privilege given to very few in the Old Testament. We sometimes get messages from God, we may hear God's voice, but it is very rare for someone in the Old Testament to actually see God - so it's pretty special, this event. Pretty special that he's having this dream. He has this stairway reaching to heaven, he can see the angels of the Lord, and he sees God himself. How do we know it's God? Because he tells us, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac," it doesn't get much clearer than that! Then God gives us this promise that "your descendants will spread out like the dust of the earth," verse 14, and, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and through your offspring. I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go." That's quite a promise! So, when Jacob wakes up, he realises that he's met with God.

Something else unusual here he remembers the dream in sufficient detail that

ultimately it gets written down and becomes part of the book of Genesis? How many times do you remember what actually happens in your dreams? Not very often! Very, very, few times do we actually remember the content of a dream in any detail, so here we have not only have a very unusual dream, we have the unusual fact that Jacob remembers it - that tells you how important this message from God was. God not only gives him the message in this spectacular image, this spectacular vision, but he ensures that he remembers it so that it's not a waste of time. "Surely the Lord is in this place," verse 16, "and I was not aware of it."

Why was he not aware of it? Because God is often in unexpected places. Of course, naturally, God is everywhere, we just don't recognise him - but sometimes we recognise him being there in

unexpected ways and unexpected times we see God at work and we didn't think he would be.

It doesn't occur to us that he is working in that place - on paper we know that God works everywhere, but when we walk into Tesco or ALDI or the council offices or school, do we automatically think, as we go about our business, "God is working in this place"? No, we just kind of get on with it - we're not aware of it.

Let's take a look at our reading from John.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman are having a discussion about where should God be worshipped. "You Jews say that the only place to worship God is Jerusalem but our ancestors worshipped here on this mountain." Now, the group that are called "Samaritans" in the New Testament - their origins are a little bit obscure, and definitely debatable, it is clear from the New Testament that there were some similarities in what they believed and that there had been a lot of antagonism between the two groups.

So, you've got the Samaritans worshipping on this mountain. while the Jews want to worship in Jerusalem - but they haven't always worshipped in Jerusalem of course. Prior to Solomon's temple, the main place of worship would have been at the "tent of the Lord's presence", that same tent that had been created during the long journey from Egypt, the tent of course where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Now, that tent moved around a lot. Not just during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, but even as they settled into the promised land. It spent time at Gilgal, it spent time at Bethel, and it spent time a lot of time at Shiloh before being moved to Solomon's temple, and of course during the exile they would not have been able to worship in Jerusalem at all. So, really, it's rather hypocritical of the Jews to say that the "only place" to worship is Jerusalem, and Jesus comes back to this very same point. Verse 21 "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." "God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in the spirit," verse 24.

Now, the Holy Spirit is not a physical being, and therefore doesn't have to reside anywhere. Result, you don't have to go to a particular place

to speak to or to experience God's spirit. We don't have to go to any particular place to be able to worship God. Well, you might say, but we worship here in church, this is where we worship God. Question: is church a building or is church the people? Because anywhere a group of people meet and worship God is church, so we can indeed worship God anywhere, because God is everywhere. He can be worshipped everywhere, he can be experienced everywhere. God can do his work anywhere, and is frequently already working there when we arrive, and the result of that is we can be part of God's work anywhere and everywhere.

Let's come back to Jacob. In verse 14 "all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring", and we know that his descendants will

spread out "like the dust of the earth from the East to the West to the North to the South". There's no boundary mentioned - they spread out and you could potentially argue that the various exiles of the Jews was part of that spreading out process. So, people don't come to God's people in order for God to work on them - God's people go out to do God's work among the peoples of the earth. We go out to where they are. We meet them where they are. We don't say, "you've got to come here in order for us to talk to you, in order for us to be Christ to you". No, we go to them - that is what we are called to do.

When Jesus sent out the disciples for their missions he sent them out. He didn't call the people of the villages to him, he sent his people out to meet them where they were. Very little of God's work will ever happen inside a church building - it's great that some does, obviously, but most of the work is done outside of the building.

So what does that mean in practice? God's people are to bless all the peoples of the earth. We, as God's people, are to bless all the peoples of the earth. That is the purpose of God's people as shown in our reading from Genesis. That is our purpose. We are Jesus' ambassadors wherever we go. Now, an ambassador doesn't stop being an ambassador because he's not officially on duty. He doesn't stop being an ambassador because he's gone to the pub, or to a football match, he or she is always an ambassador. They always represent the people that they are supposed to represent. The French ambassador is always

representing the French, so we as Jesus' ambassadors must always be representing Jesus. The old saying, perhaps a cliché, "what would Jesus do?" That, basically, is our motto if you like as ambassadors.

So when I go into Aldi's and I'm waiting in the queue I'm thinking "blooming 'eck" I hate these self service tills, and I wish the person in front of me would hurry up," am I representing Christ in what I do? Probably not. When I walk down the

street, when I go to work, I have to represent Jesus in what I do. I have to represent the attitude of Jesus. Does that mean we need to preach to everyone? No. Does it mean that we need to act as Jesus would have us act? Yes, it does, wherever we are.

In computing and in some other industries there's the term interface. It's a place where two things meet and they interact with each other. A lot of the sockets on a computer or other machine are often called interfaces, it's where they connect. USB is an interface, HDMI is an interface. The place where you put your key into the ignition in the car is an interface. The place where you speak to somebody else, where you act with (or against) somebody else is an interface. It is an interaction and those interactions take place everywhere.

Naturally, each of us have some places we regularly go to. Certain shops,

offices, schools, playgrounds, homes even. These are the places we most often

interact with other people. These are our interfaces. So, everywhere you

interact with, or interface with other people, is where you are Jesus'

ambassadors. These are the places to be particularly aware of how we come

across to people.

I would like you to take stock of where you interact with people. Here's what we are going to do. Choose a partner nearby, preferably

not a family member. Each of you will list as many places and situations as you can think of in one minute, then change over. Choose your partners! [Allow a moment or two for people to sort themselves out.] Let's start the clock. [At end of first minute, invite them to change over.]

Let's see what you came up with. [Roving mic soundbites.]

Some common themes there. I wonder who came up with the most places? Anyone with more than ten? Twenty? Thirty?

So, lots of places and situations in which we interact with other people.

These days, of course, as some of you have noted, we also have many interactions online. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, email, TikTok, and so on. It may not be a physical place, but bear in mind that you are still interacting with physical people - and they have opinions, reasons and emotions as well. It is just as important that we are ambassadors of Christ online, or on the phone even, as it is when we meet people in the flesh. Actually, in some ways, it is more important. When we interact with people online, or post opinions about people or things, we are often less restrained and less polite than we are in person. It can seem impersonal. We can do as much, or more, damage to people online as we can in person. The reverse is also true: we can often help and encourage people just as much online as in person.

So, to conclude:

Our purpose, as God's people, is to bless all the peoples of the Earth.

We have to go to them, not expect them to come to us.

We must be ambassadors of Christ in all of our interactions.

There is no restriction on where God can work, or which of us he will work through.

Let's pray.