**28th April 2013**

**Genesis 28.1-22**

If you ask many people their favourite rock song of all time, many will list Led Zeppelin’s Stairway to Heaven. Any guitarist who fancies themselves pretends to be Jimmy Page playing it. The words of "Stairway to heaven’ have been much debated. It has been suggested that Robert Plant’s lyrics use pagan imagery and if you play it backwards it’s a message from Satan! It has also been suggested that it is a Christian song. ‘You can take two paths… find the rock that doesn’t roll…’.In the early 1970’s the song seemed to be an invitation to abandon the new traditions and follow the old gods. It expressed a yearning for spiritual transformation deep in the hearts of a new generation. In time, it became Led Zeppelin's anthem.

Well this morning we are looking at the story behind the song – the original stairway to heaven – the one featured in the story of Jacob from the first book in the Bible, the book of Genesis. It too is a story of spiritual longing and transformation.

Last week we recalled the story of how Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and his father’s blessing. As a result of this, Jacob the quiet home loving boy, is forced to flee for his life because of the hatred of his brother.

Now on the first night away from home he can’t find anywhere to give him a bed for the night and he is forced to lie down under the stars. At last, falling asleep, he starts to dream. He sees angels going up and down a stairway between earth and heaven. And standing above the ladder he sees the Lord himself who introduced himself as the God of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. God reassures Jacob that the promises made to them, that they would prosper and increase, will be true for him as well. ‘I shall be with you and protect you’, says God. When Jacob wakes up he is awestruck and marks the spot as a scared holy place Beth-el – the house of God.

It’s a famous story full of symbolism and imagery that we can apply to our own experience of faith and of God.

They say that it often takes disaster or adversity before some people seek after God. Life has to rupture and break open before we delve deeply into what life is all about it, whether there is any meaning to it, whether God is there. Change, loss, birth are all ruptures when we are knocked out of our stride, our normal routines, when our complacent and even comfortable life is disrupted and we have to look around us, reassess, become open to reality once more. Jacob’s life has been ruptured. He has cheated his brother and has had to flee. All his home comforts and familiar way of life has been swept away. It is highly significant that it is at this point he meets God.

It is the testimony of many people that in times of adversity God comes close. I think that is mainly because we are more open to God’s help. Most of the time we think we can manage alright, thanks very much, and ignore the divine help on our doorstep. One old Christian mystic said ‘God is always present, it is just that we are not always present to God’. Practising the spiritual disciplines of prayer, bible study, worship and fellowship with other Christians are some of the key ways of being present to God. Jacob has to give up his wakeful control in vulnerable sleep. In his dream, his guard is down and he meets God.

People have religious experiences in all kinds of ways. People meet God today in all sorts of ways- some dramatic: blinding lights, dreams, visions, and miracles. Some gentle and reflective: a quiet awareness of nature, of not being alone, of there being someone there, watching over you, or powerful moments of conviction and inspiration. They all happen! They usually take people by surprise because they are God’s initiative. Few people seek after God. The testimony of the Bible is that God seeks after us. A stairway to heaven may give the impression of our noble spiritual searchings’ trying to find God. But there is two - way traffic on a stairway and the witness of scripture is that God is always seeking us. God is looking to meet with us.

I have just finished my latest 5,000 word essay for my MA in Christian Spirituality. It was on St Augustine.

Augustine lived in the fourth century and would go on to become one of the most influential Christian thinkers. His early life was very different. Augustine was a bit of a lad as they say. He liked the ladies and he was also very intelligent. . For most of his life he was a famed academic in the Roman Empire. He was very successful in rhetoric, public speaking and argument. But he lived a thoroughly dissolute, self-indulgent, promiscuous life.

He had come to intellectual certainty about the truth of Christianity but he could not embrace it in faith. “The way of the savior attracted me greatly,” he wrote, “but I was reluctant to pass through the straight and narrow gate…I loved the beauty of your house but I was tightly bound by the love of women…I was weak and chose the easier way, and for this single reason my whole life was one of inner turbulence and listless indecision. I had found the pearl of great price; but I hesitated to sell all that I had to buy it.”

One day an African Christian employed at court, one Pontitian, came to see Augustine and his friend Alipius. He took occasion to speak of the Life of St. Antony. They listened eagerly to the story of his holy life. The visit affected Augustine deeply (that’s the power of personal testimonies – when people see or hear about real Christian lives); his weakness was revealed to him. In his previous state of half wishing for conversion he had begged God for the grace of a new life, but at the same time had been a little afraid of being heard too soon. "In the first dawning of my youth," he writes, "I begged of Thee chastity, but by halves, miserable wretch that I am; I said, 'Give me chastity, but not yet,' afraid that Thou mightest hear me too soon, and heal me of the disease which I wished to have satisfied rather than cured."

When Pontitian had departed, Augustine turned to Alipius with the words: "What are we doing to let the unlearned start up and seize Heaven by force, while we, with all our knowledge, linger behind, cowardly and callous, wallowing in our sins? Because they have outstripped us and gone on before, are we ashamed to follow them? Is it not more shameful not to follow them?"

He went out into the garden, Alipius following, and they sat down at some distance from the house. Augustine was in the throes of his conflict, torn between the promptings of the Holy Spirit calling him to a new life and the seductive memory of his sins.

Advancing farther into the garden alone, he threw himself under a fig-tree, crying out, "How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever? Remember not my past failings! "

As he lay there despairing, suddenly he heard a childlike voice repeating, "Tolle lege! Tolle lege!" (Take, read! Take, read! ) He wondered if there was a game in which children said these words, and could not remember that he had ever heard of one.

Interpreting the voice as of divine origin, he returned to where Alipius was sitting, He turned to his copy of the Scriptures, which was opened to Roman. 13. His eyes were drawn to the following words: "Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." (Rom. 13:13-14)

Augustine felt an immediate sense of release, as if his long struggle was ended. He pointed out the passage to Alipius, who read on, "accept anyone who is weak in faith without debate about his misgivings."

They then went to relate these happenings to Monica, his mother, who was a Christian and who had been praying for the last twenty years for her son Augustine, t6o come to faith in Christ. She rejoiced and praised God, "who is able to do all things more abundantly than we ask or understand."

Augsutine become the Christian bishop of Hippo, the greatest theologian after Paul, and one of the most formidable intellects of Western civilization. He also said we need the right knowledge about God and ourselves, but we also need faith and an experience of the Holy Spirit, whereby we ‘know’ God, where god has touched us, met us, claimed us, given us new sight, vision, heart, . Augustine combined the knowledge with with experience, the head with the heart.

Jacob perhaps knew about the God of his father and grandfathers but this is his first personal encounter with God.

God says to Jacob I am with you and will protect you. Jacob was the first in bible history to hear that assurance. It was a promise repeated later to many other Biblical characters from Moses to Joshua and the name of Jesus means Emmanuel God with us. The one who will never leave us nor forsake us. Paul summed it up in Romans nothing in life nor death can separate us from he who loves us.

I remember talking with a war veteran who had been on the frontline of battle during the Second World War He had seen many colleagues killed and had held his best friend as he lay dying from gunshot. How did that affect your faith I asked him? ‘I lost faith in the goodness of humanity’ he said. ‘I realised what evil there was in the world. But my faith in God was strengthened because in the midst of all this carnage he was the only hope. Only God’s eternal love could redeem this mess’.

It often seems to be the case that as we travel through the desert times in our live, when we feel alone and fearful, God uses those times to speak to us of his love and his purposes for us, and reassures us that we don’t travel alone but that he with us.

For Jacob this was his first personal encounter with God. He knew of his parents faith and of their own religious experiences, but now for the first time he has come face to face with God, and he is scared and overwhelmed by it. He confesses that God is in this place. And I didn’t know it! Somehow he was looking in the wrong direction. . ‘God was in this place and I was not aware of it!’

He immediately starts to worship according to the customs of the age. He sets up a stone that had had been his pillow and consecrates it with oil. And then he makes a vow. Vows were often made in Bible times by those in distress promising to give God something if their prayers were answered. Some have questioned Jacob’s faith in making a vow contingent on his safe return to his homeland, when this had been promised by God. The deceiver and cheat that Jacob is, perhaps he can’t trust anyone. Perhaps he was judging everyone (even God) by his own standards.

Jacob’s comfort zone of understanding had been badly shaken, though some of his old nature still comes through, as he tries to bargain with God. He failed to realize that God wasn’t offering a deal but a promise! But Jacob was edging his bets. ‘If you do this for me God, then I’ll do this…

We can all tend to have an ‘if only’ faith. ‘If’ God you give me this… then I will do that’.

There was a humorous story about a boy who wanted a new bike. So he prayed ‘God if I’m good will you give me a new bike?’ He made a special effort that week to please his parents, not fight with his sister, and keep his bedroom tidy. But at the end of the week there was no new bike. So he got a bit annoyed. His mum, who was a devout Catholic, asked him what the matter was and he said ‘God doesn’t listen to my prayers!

The next day she was putting some clothes away in his wardrobe and she noticed a statue of the Virgin Mary at the bottom of the wardrobe. There was a letter by the side of it. It said the following: ‘Ok God if you want to see your mother again, give me a new bike!’

There is no ‘if only....’ on God’s side towards us. The Bible declares consistently that God’s love and acceptance of us are not conditional – it doesn’t rely on an ‘if only clause…’

Real experience of God always results in heartfelt worship. Here Jacob gave all he had, the stone, the oil, a tenth of his future income. To pray for a safe return I think showed faith, not unbelief.

How do you act in the face of God’s promises? ‘God helps those who help themselves’, we are told. Perhaps it is no sign of unbelief to work actively to secure the answer to your prayers. Everything depends of course on your motive for doing so. Do you work as if you’re counting on God? Or do you do so because you might as well make sure of securing what you want. There’s an activity that springs from faith, and another that arises from lack of it.

The real shock is God appearing to Jacob. This is the exile, the treacherous fugitive, the liar and deceiver. If you thought God only appears to nice respectable people – think again. You might cheat, swear, smell, belch, fornicate, and deceive. But if God is dealing with Jacob – he can deal with you.

Jacob’s experience at Bethel reaffirmed the promises yet again. But more than that, his experience is a model for everyone, reminding us that in our moments of deepest crisis God is still with us and will eventually bring his promises to fulfilment in us if we trust him.

Phillip Doddridge summed up the significance of this episode for every believer in his hymn:

O God of Bethel (Number 71 in Rejoice and Sing)

**Theme introduction**

An internet search would reveal the fact that ‘Jacob’s ladder’ is the title of a whole range of programmes and places – from

a voluntary service to assist people in expressing grief, helping unemployed or underemployed people, a patented treadmill

climber, an inn, a neuro-developmental learning centre, a hillside fl ight of 274 steps in Cheddar Gorge and a bookshop. Ask

what people think about when they hear the phrase ‘Jacob’s ladder’, then talk about some of their suggestions.

Briefl y tell the story and then, if possible, show a copy of William Blake’s picture of Jacob’s ladder (downloadable from the

internet). Talk about how much this image relates to people’s idea of what happened to Jacob on that memorable night. The

children are going to discover more about Jacob’s experience in their groups.

**Prayer idea**

Label at least three areas of the church as a place where people are likely to go this week – school, work, church, home,

hospital, etc. Light a candle in each place as a symbol that God is there. Invite people to visit at least one of these places

to pray about what they might experience there, concluding with these words based on what God said to Jacob: ‘Lord God,

thank you that wherever I go, you promise to be with me.’