

Ever had a dream and wondered what it meant? The account of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28 is one of a stark encounter with God in a way that to Jacob was confusing, frightening and yet all too clear. Dreams can be like that – unsettling and yet encouraging. Psychologists will tell us that dreams help our brains to integrate what we know and have stored in our brains already with what we have learned through the day. It's one of the reasons that sleep is considered so essential; not enough and we overload the short-term memory storage space! But what of these type of dreams? Dreams in which God seems to speak to us?

This particular dream was helpful for Jacob. From it he understood that God was always with him. The ladder a symbol that God could make a path to him no matter where he was. This was a great encouragement to Jacob as he was travelling on a journey to a different land to find a wife ... no casual endeavour. Furthermore, God was re-enforcing and confirming the covenant that Jacob was surely aware of, a covenant God had made with his ancestors Abraham and Isaac. This covenant promised his family would have descendants like the stars, like sand on the beach, in number. In addition, God also promised Jacob, in this dream, that He would divinely protect Jacob on the journey he was on until he returned home. This would have been of great comfort and we see that Jacob responded with religious awe, setting up an altar and worshipping God in that place. He also responds positively: if God will protect him then he will return a tenth of his income to the Lord's service. Here He is not testing God but rather his own discernment – was this dream of God or just of his own mind? If things worked out as he'd dreamed, then it was clearly God speaking to him and it was incumbent upon him to respond appropriately. The altar was a step of faith, future action a promise of continued faithfulness. Do our dreams change our course of action? How do we check out what we dream – could some be from God? Does God small seeds in our consciousness by various methods and waits to see how we respond? Learning to listen to the voice of the Spirit speaking into our lives and then responding is one of the disciplines of the Christian life.

In Matthew 24, Matthew records one of Jesus' most famous parables – that of the maliciously sown seeds. Life, as we know, is not always easy nor the journey of faith as straight-forward as we might like it to be. Dramatically miraculous encounters such as Jacob's ladder aren't that frequent but by His Spirit God is constantly speaking onto our lives, if we are open to recognising His hand so much the better. In contrast it is all too easy to be open to the distractions, the temptations and the trials along life's path that might distract us from the Lord. Jesus tells this parable to give both encouragement and show the reality of our situation. The sower of the good seed is Jesus Himself. The work He is doing, the Good News being shared, is the planting of a good crop, the wheat. Jesus sows good, reliable, strong seed that will grow with strong heads and germinate producing a bountiful crop. The seed and growth of this seed reflects the children of God who have responded to Jesus' teaching, the work of the Spirit in our lives and the work we will do for His kingdom. In contrast the evil one, Satan, sows corrupted seed, tares, thistles, weeds that do damage and multiply only trouble. The field of course, is the world. What is also significant in this parable is the clear timeframe. The field will only last for a certain season then the crop will be harvested.

When will this harvest happen? In the language of Jesus' explanation, the end will come at the End of the Age and will see angels execute Jesus' judgement on the earth. The good and bad will be separated and the corrupt thrown into the fire. The time “**of wailing and gnashing of teeth**” is coded language in Matthew and Luke's gospels referring to the time of God's Judgement. In Matthew's code the wailing refers to the plaintive cries following God's righteous judgement and the gnashing of teeth a reference to the physical torments of hell. What is also significant in the timeframe is clear indication that between the death and resurrection of Jesus until the time of Jesus' return there will be a constant struggle between good and evil, between

the children of God and those of the world. Whether this is pre, during or post the Millennial Kingdom is not so clear.

So far then we are left with Jacob's promise and dream of the future and our reality of the conflict between good and evil until Jesus returns. When we return to the epistle of Romans we see the two realities brought together by the apostle Paul. Continuing last week's reflection we are encouraged to live and walk by the Spirit ... in other words, not just by what we can see, hear and perceive but rather by listening to that still, small voice within, the Spirit. This listening to the Spirit requires a personal, intimate relationship with God that is offered to each one of us. Like Jesus, we are encouraged to call God 'Abba', Father, in the closeness of the relationship of a small child with a loving Father.

However, we are also made aware of a difficult reality. As adopted children and heirs with Jesus we also, in season of time we are in, are likely to suffer for righteousness' sake. Let's consider this for a moment. How do we suffer for the Kingdom? Do we live in a world of tares and thistles? Do we have work-places, schools, social, political and sporting environments that go against the things of God? You can answer that from your own experience. **{s5}** The reality is that today if you stand up for many of the things the Bible says are important you are likely to get shot down. In our world to say there is only one God and the rest are man or demonic made creations or idols is to go against the tide of society. To stand up for specific truths is to swim upstream. To complain against dishonesty, blasphemy, even to stand up for life itself, is likely to get oneself in increasingly serious trouble. The list goes on. To demonstrate God's love in action is to risk abuse, others taking advantage, perceived weakness and worse. This is the world that Jesus says that we will live in until He returns. Of course, if you never stand for anything then none of this will be a problem.

This might seem rather miserable but then Paul puts it into a very positive perspective for us. The pain is inconsequential in terms of the reward. We know this to be true in so many aspects of life. We work hard so that we might achieve in life – provide for our families, build homes and have a degree of freedom, build our community. We train for sports and leisure so that we can enjoy them and even compete so we can win. We study so we can be informed about things and develop ourselves so we can achieve things we want to. We even fight weeds in the garden so we can produce a good crop. We read so we can become more informed. We wrestle with our fallen nature so that we can become more Christ-like. So that we can become the best that we can be. Why? Because we know that everything good requires effort on our part and success only comes with putting the hard yards in. In terms of the ultimate goal, being with the Lord is the greatest goal and greatest reward. It surpasses all others and every cost, every price towards that goal is worth it. It is the great race worth running with everything we have. It is the pearl; of great price, the asset worth selling everything for. Such effort in this cause itself is noble and the reward eternal.

Within this context the apostle points us to a great truth that I'm not sure the Christian community has really come to grips with yet. Something we, as Christians, need to be involved in. Listen to this carefully from Romans 8:19-21, **"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."** This speaks of the expectation of the whole created order. This covers all the natural world, the universe, every living thing. Even the supernatural world of the angels, because they too are created beings, is involved. So, what does all of creation wait for what? For us. For you. Why? Because the Creation was subjected to corruption as a result of God punishing Adam's sin. Prior to that there was no corruption on earth, yes there was a corruptor in Satan, but no corruption had occurred. As a result of sin, the Created Order was corrupted, subject to decay and death, to 'futility' in the Old English, and has continued to be so ever since. In allowing free will and choice evil has been allowed to wreck its havoc in the world. But God's timetable, God's economy will not allow this forever. Recovery comes in

three stages. The first stage, since the fall, is humanity taking up its role in caring for the Created Order. Not to pillage and rape the world for its own vested interest like a virus but rather to work in harmony restoring, building and developing the world to the place of incredible beauty it should be. Of course, we see how well that has gone. Secondly, in the man Jesus, God Immanuel, redeeming and reconciling us and the world to God a future promise is made certain. Again, in this reconciliation we take up our God ordained role of carers. And thirdly, at the end of time God will restore all things and there will be a new heaven and earth where all will be as it should be. Again it is likely that our work in eternity, the work we will enjoy immensely will include caring for what God has created. So where are we at this time? Actually, we are in stages 1 and 2. We still have a duty to the created order under God. Jesus has come and we await the end of the age. If anything, by the Spirit, we are even more empowered to do what God wants us to do. His mandate has not changed. Creation then longs for us to do our task to free it from bondage and decay to the degree we can. Ultimately of course, Jesus the child and Son of God, will complete the task.

When we look at the challenges in the world today how many of them are man-made? {s8} How much of the ill-health, poverty, pollution, the destruction and loss of animal species, of forests and natural habitats across the world is due to human action or inaction? Answer: most of it. Even the creation of the deserts and wastelands is primarily due to human influence ... and let's not even start on climate change – how much is natural and how much human will be debated forever. What we do know is that since COVID-19 the atmosphere has changed dramatically. Christians are called to be at the forefront of positive change. How this will happen or what causes are to be focussed on is still to be seen because Christendom has yet to really take up the mandate given to humanity by God. But in the meantime, the Created Order groans under the weight of the burden of our sin placed upon it.

Interestingly, the apostle Paul places creations groaning alongside ours. The closer we grow to God the more we see the corruption of the world and how far we are from God's righteousness. We long to be free from the burden of sin and its impact on the world.

So how, when the issues seem so large, do we make any difference at all? It starts with each one of us personally. What can we do in our own attitude, our own environment to bring about change? Shrugging our shoulders and saying it's all too hard, too big is not an acceptable answer because this is a God-given responsibility.

We make a difference when we engage with the issues. Not everything, we can't do that, but we can choose one or two things we can do. Places we can start. It doesn't matter if its embracing recycling more fully, supporting ecological groups, getting out and planting trees or writing letters to politicians and companies or a myriad other ways, you make a difference when you do something. Together, when we all do something, much more is achieved. Imagine the impact Christendom could make on the world if every Christian deliberately set about supporting sustainable ecological causes – practically and politically. The world would be shaken up. This is the task of each of us – to determine what we should do support and do and then do something about it.

What then is our hope? The apostle Paul concludes that we hope for something we do not have yet but we know that all of this will come about fully when Jesus returns. But He is not here yet so in the meantime He has given us work to do. What dream has God placed in your heart? What image of how the future could be for you, your family, your environment has He put deep in your heart? And how are you working toward it practically? This is today's challenge and may God bless you in your endeavours in His work because you, in your own small or large area, make a difference that God, if no one else, sees. It might be easy, it might be hard and there might be opposition and cost, but the world and God is waiting to see what you will do. Amen