

August 2, 2020 God is Found in the Struggle Genesis 32:3-31

About six years ago I had the privilege to be on 2 months of sabbatical study. Part of that time was spent learning about and experiencing Celtic Christianity in its historic setting and the contemporary reality of today, namely in Scotland and Ireland. Those are the lands of my own ancestors' origins. On a religious pilgrimage in Ireland, I experienced something of its' glorious landscape and learned about the history of its people. At times the Irish lived times of oppression, revolution, death, poverty and executions. What I have come to appreciate more because of that experience is the complexity of that history which involved so many struggles for self-determination for the people of Ireland, throughout much of their past.

I want to begin with our first morning in Ireland. Daniel O'Connell is a name which immediately raises emotion within the hearts of those of the Republic of Ireland and perhaps all those of Irish extraction, for he was a great liberator for his people of the 19th century. In the ways of many great leaders, O'Connell used his intellect, knowledge of the law, and community organizing to bring about change through the power structures of the day without violent means.

Not so far from our accommodation on O'Connell street was the Garden of Remembrance, a memorial garden dedicated to the memory of "all those who gave their lives in the cause of Irish Freedom." Here 'freedom fighters' are honoured for their sacrifices through rebellions and uprisings of 1798, 1803, 1848, 1867, 1916, and the Irish War of Independence 1919-21. The actual site of the garden was where many leaders of the 1916 Easter rising were held prisoner.

Now I want you to experience something of the symbolism of this place. So, imagine a large rectangular opening in the uptown surrounded by churches and museums and a busy street and hotels and restaurants and shops. But the garden is sunken below street level and there is a kind of quiet retreat possible from all of the hustle and bustle around. It is a somber, thoughtful place. There is a large cross-shaped pool which occupies much of the sunken space. To the sides of the pool there are simply adorned flower beds and benches to sit on and contemplate the lives 'patriots' have given. In the floor of the large pool are stunning mosaic tile-zig-zagging blue and green with a wave pattern, and in spots there are other symbols that interrupt the green-blue pattern. The symbols are weapons-spears, knives and shields-those weapons are broken, split in two. In Celtic custom, at the end of battle, weapons were broken and cast in the river, signifying the end of hostilities.

In front, above this massive cross-pool, at street level, is a larger than life size sculpture. At the head of the cross-pool one ascends some stairs to look upon a frightening portrayal of The Children of Lir, who were three children of the Lord of the Sea. According to the mythology they were turned into swans by their jealous aunt and stepmother, who was bitter about their love for their Father. It's a story of bondage and suffering; a very sad story filled with lost relationships and lost opportunities brought on through jealousy and misunderstanding. Yet it is a resurrection story of hope too, for those children transformed to swans, eventually fly their way to return to their parents in the end.

On the circular wall next to the sculpture in golden Gaelic script, is a poem, "We Saw a Vision," written by Liam Mac Uistin. This is the English translation: *In the darkness of despair we saw a vision. We lit the light of hope. And it was not extinguished. In the desert of discouragement we saw a vision. We planted the tree of valour. And it blossomed. In the winter of bondage we saw a vision. We melted the snow of lethargy. And the river of resurrection flowed from it. We sent our vision aswim like a swan on the river. The vision became a reality. Winter became summer. Bondage became freedom. And this we left to you as your inheritance. O Generations of freedom remember us, the Generations of the vision.*

The spotlight in Scripture today is upon Jacob. Jacob was an early child of God's chosen people. He had been given a blessing and a vision, the same one given to his father by God, "I am the God of Abraham(Jacob's grandfather); don't fear a thing because I'm with you. I'll bless you and make your children flourish because of Abraham my servant.

Perhaps there is something of Jacob in many of us. Jacob and Esau were born to Isaac and Rebekah. The parents of the two boys had their shortcomings, just as all earthly parents do. Isaac favoured Esau because he became a rugged man of the outdoors. Rebekah came to favour Jacob, who preferred life indoors among the tent. In the end Rebekah 'schemed' with Jacob to undermine her husband Isaac and have Jacob steal the blessing intended for first-born Esau. After this happened, Jacob was told by his mother that he better flee for his life, but her warning was 'tainted' because she actually wanted Jacob to marry someone within her tribe rather than a Canaanite woman, like Esau had married.

You may remember the story, Jacob went to live with Rebekah's brother Laban. Jacob ended up finding his match in 'scheming' as that uncle would make promises about the daughter he would give Jacob in return for 7 years of labour, or the sheep herds and livestock, or whatever and then he would change the terms of the agreement. Yet, through all of this God showed favour on Jacob, with the birth of many children and many sheep and goats. Jacob finally was fed up with Laban's ways, and believed God was calling him back to his birthplace, back to his family.

A message comes from one of Jacob's lieutenants that Esau is heading their way and that with him are 400 men. Jacob immediately takes this as a threat and begins to make preparations. Despite the goodness Jacob had experienced he was still afraid of facing his brother's wrath. So, he had an interesting, thoroughly modern approach to his dilemma. He would try to buy off Esau's wrath with his sales swagger. He would hope to give Esau gifts in order to temper his rage. He would 'buy him off.'

For Jacob, true worth lies in what you have, not what you are. So he organizes his little empire into four. Whatever he has-slaves, servants, camels, goats-everything is divided into four identical groups. He puts each group under separate supervision and sends them travelling south at carefully calculated intervals. They will eventually meet his brother. Esau will see the first lot and ask to whom they belong. Jacob's instructions to the overseers are classic. Esau is to be told that they belong to Jacob. Jacob's scheme is that Esau will be impressed and when it happens 4 times in succession he will be really really impressed. Because Jacob himself would measure a rival by his possessions, he assumes Esau will measure him in this way. And as final insurance, if Esau decides to attack, surely he will attack the groups one at a time and maybe 'wear out' before all is destroyed.

Then Jacob does one more thing, a much wiser and more mature thing than any of the other 'scheming'. He decides that he will spend the night by himself before meeting his brother. This may well have been the bravest thing he has ever done. Jacob pleads with God that he will live through the next few days. He is aware of all that God has done for him, but he isn't so sure about how this matter with his brother will all work out. The night becomes a confrontation with Jacob's own dark side. Jacob falls asleep by a small river that flows from the east into the Jordan. Jacob is alone. But in the night there comes a figure, who begins to wrestle with Jacob. At no time are we told who this is. In various translations the stranger is called *one* or an *angel* or a *man*.

Anglican priest, Herbert O'Driscoll suggests there is good reason we are not told. Jacob and the stranger are evenly matched. Eventually the stranger wounds Jacob, and then asks to be let go. Jacob refuses to release the stranger unless the stranger blesses him, which he eventually does, but not until Jacob actually comes to terms with his deception, his betrayal of his brother and his father. Jacob then asks the stranger his name and receives the rhetorical question, "Why is it that you ask my name?" Only then does the stranger give Jacob his blessing, and disappears. Believing that in some sense he has been wrestling with God, and rejoicing that he has survived, Jacob journeys on.

Jacob experienced God in the struggle. What was the struggle all about? Probably it was about his life of deal-making rather than truth-telling. Quite possibly, it was about his stealing an inheritance that was really not his. Very likely, it was about Jacob's real worth as a person and how he was living (or not living) that out. I suspect most of us have had at some time that visit from the 3:00 am stranger. We have engaged in the struggle. Our fears, anxieties, even terror, make this

stranger a formidable opponent. At best we gain insight about ourselves through this struggle, so that our learning will become a blessing in us and for us. As Jacob was forced to grow in to someone greater than he had been, so also we may be changed, if we are prepared to see the stranger as a messenger of God.

In the encounter Jacob's hip was damaged. The sun came up as he passed Penueel, limping because of his hip. We each travel our different journeys, to some degree, as wounded travelers.

We were part a group of 45 people on a religious pilgrimage. We were given a blessing by a priest in county Kerry, Father Dan O'Riordan at St. Brendan's Chapel in Curraheen. Before he offered prayers for our blessing on the pilgrimage he first updated us on the recent news of his region of the church. The economic times have been more difficult on the west coast of Ireland. This has certainly had its effect on people of the region. But not so long ago there was joy to be shared through the witness of one of God's faithful servants from that part of God's kingdom.

A young man, Donal Walsh gained much notoriety over the last months of his life, especially through his writing a "Suicide Plea" article and appearance on Brendan O'Connor's Saturday Night Show at age 16. He had lived with a cancer diagnosis at age 12, was treated with 9 months of chemo, had ½ of his thigh joint removed and the lower part of his leg. Donal had dreamed of playing rugby for Munster and travelling the world. In 2012 cancer was found once again, in his lungs and he had two lower lobes removed and 4 months more chemotherapy. By that fall 6 more bone tumours were found and it was not expected that Donal would live until Christmas, but he beat the odds. He advocated for better cancer treatment facilities for young people. His fundraising efforts brought 50,000 euros to improve the hospital ward where he had been treated. On news of high suicide rates in his county Kerry, he pleaded with his contemporaries,... "I feel angry that these people choose to take their lives, to ruin their families and to leave behind a mess that no one can clean up. Yet I am here with no choice, trying as best I can to prepare my family and friends for what's about to come and leave as little a mess as possible. I know that most of these people could be going through financial despair and have other problems in life, but I am at the depths of despair and, believe me, there is a long way to go before you get to where I am. For these people, no matter how bad life gets, there are no reasons bad enough to make them do this; if they slept on it or looked for help they could find a solution, and they need to think of the consequences of what they are about to do...This is a permanent solution to a temporary problem..." He advocated turning to a parent, a teacher, a friend, a priest for help.

Donal was asked by the national interviewer about his outlook. "Do you now think daily that all the good has gone out of life?" "No, I've had my difficult moments but I don't sit around feeling sorry for myself all day long, just waiting for the end. I concentrate on the beautiful things which seem now even more in focus. The support I am given by my family and friends is wonderful." Young Donal Walsh found God's presence in life's struggle.

After the national interview the rates of teen suicide dropped for 4 months and new supports were put in place. In March 2013 Donal's earthly journey came to an end. Several thousand attended the funeral for Donal Walsh. His rugby mates and other friends walked beside the hearse for 2 miles from his home in Blennerville to St. John's church, Tralee.

Donal's article advocating life caught the imagination of his country, Ireland. He said, "...life is a precious gift which is irreplaceable..." Thanks be to God!