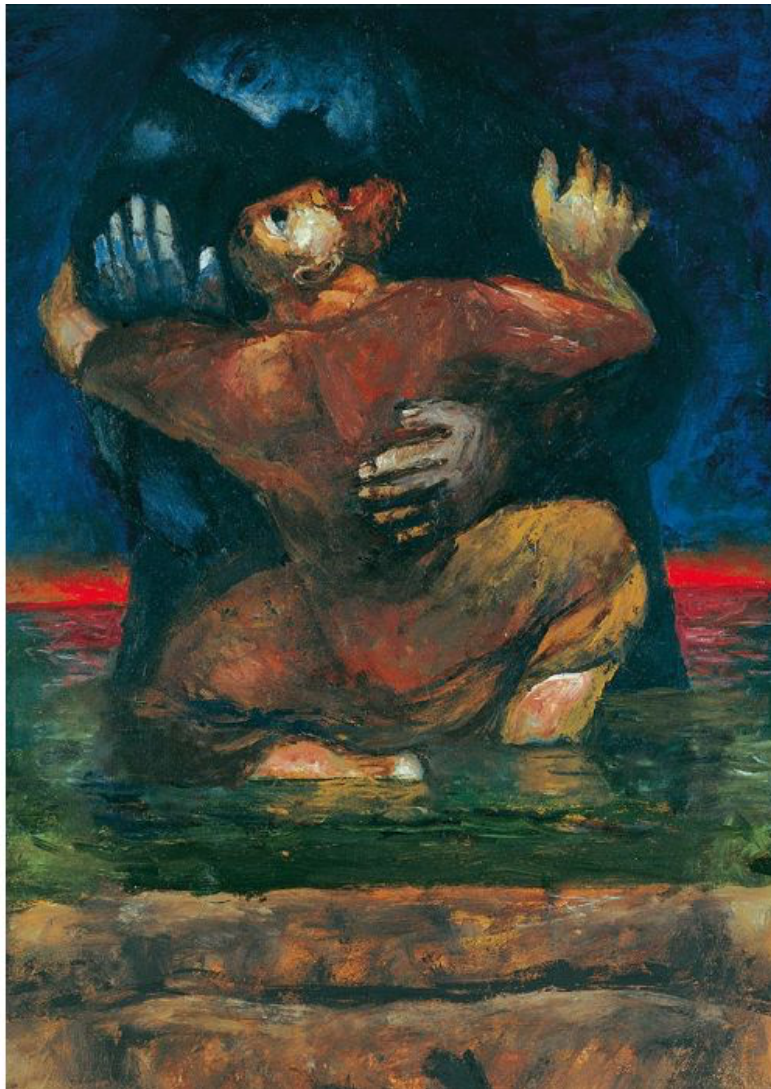


Silent Reflections
Tuesday 29 September 2026
Close Encounter



Jacob's Struggle at the Jabbok by Sieger Köder

Introduction

On a guided retreat this year, we were led by Andrew Mayes, who for a number of years was Spirituality Adviser to the Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf and lived for several years in Jerusalem. Together we explored the episodes in the Bible that took place by rivers and springs. A very powerful one for me was Jacob's close encounter at the River Jabbok, struggling to find his identity, asking the question: Who am I? On this Feast Day of St Michael and All Angels, it seems an appropriate incident to explore. Was Jacob wrestling with a man? an angel? God?

Mayes writes that the Jabbok, called *Nahr ez-Zarqa* in Arabic, means river of blue referring to the clear blue colour of its water. Once a vibrant river, teeming with life, it is now brown due to high levels of pollution from sewage and industrial waste. The Jordanian government has plans for its rehabilitation, but it is a complex and costly challenge and progress is slow.

Water in Biblical times, as now, was weaponised, with disputes often erupting over this vital source of life with rivers marking boundaries for the different nomadic communities. For example:

Genesis 26:18-22 (NRSV)

Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herders of Gerar quarrelled with Isaac's herders, saying, 'The water is ours.' So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarrelled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.'

So let us turn to the encounter under consideration today, of which Dan Ott writes in his blog:

The dark night is a night of blessing, a night in which we are wounded by the love of God, caught up with God in intimate wrestling.

Genesis 32:22-31 (NRSV)

The same night he [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Ways to pray:

1. One way of praying is to read the passage very slowly and listen carefully and peacefully to it. Read or whisper the words in a rhythm with your breathing – a phrase at a time – with pauses and repetitions when and where you feel like it.

This reading or listening is very different from the reading we are generally accustomed to, and you may find it referred to as *lectio divina*, literally sacred reading. This is reverential listening: listening both in a spirit of silence and of awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally - not loudly, but intimately. We read slowly, attentively, gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us today.

Once you have found a word in the passage that speaks to you in a personal way, take it in and reflect on what Jesus is showing you or calling you to. Take in the word, memorise it - and while repeating it to yourself, wrestle with it, as Jacob wrestled with God, until it touches you and draws from you a deep desire to hold out for a blessing. The final stage is to rest in his presence.

2. The second way, after reading the passage several times, is to enter the scene imaginatively (if you dare!). This requires a place alone, at best in the dark, or in a darkened room. Be Jacob, having sent on all your possessions ahead (what might these be for you?). You are left alone as you walk into the shallows of the Jabbok feeling the cool water lap around your feet. Then begin to wade in; the water rises to engulf you. How are you feeling? What are you aware of? Be open, use your body in any way that seems natural.

Whatever occurs, dramatic or otherwise, spend some time reflecting on the experience afterwards and record it in some way; this will continue to be part of the prayer.

Meditation:

Jacob was trying to prevent his past from catching up with him. He wrestled with his conscience, with the nightmare vision of his brother seeking revenge, with God. The experience scarred him for life, and ever after he limped. Was this a blessing in disguise? When he met his brother, he was forgiven. I cannot escape my past; but God can change my future, painful though it may be. The limp may be the blessing, the wound may be the cure.

Paul Sheppy (*Each Day, Each Night*, p. 65)

Further reflections:



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel

by Jack Baumgartner

Possibly after viewing this image, Guy Kettelhack wrote a poem in which he mused whether a change occurred in the wrestling '*from causing pain to making love?*'

Emily Dickinson was also inspired by this story to write this poem:

A little East of Jordan

*A little East of Jordan,
Evangelists record,
A Gymnast and an Angel
Did wrestle long and hard—*

*Till morning touching mountain—
And Jacob, waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To Breakfast—to return—*

*Not so, said cunning Jacob!
“I will not let thee go
Except thou bless me”—Stranger!
The which acceded to—*

*Light swung the silver fleeces
Peniel” Hills beyond,
And the bewildered Gymnast
Found he had worsted God!*

How do you respond to the sentiments expressed in this poem?

A prayer for today the Feast of St Michael and All Angels

*Everlasting God,
you have ordained and constituted the ministries
of angels and mortals in a wonderful order:
grant that as your holy angels
always serve you in heaven,
so, at your command,
they may help and defend us on earth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

For further insights into Biblical encounters by rivers and streams, with reflective questions, and ecological updates of the region, I strongly recommend:

Andrew D. Mayes (1925) *Unlocking the Fountains: Inspiration and Challenge from Biblical Rivers and Springs*. Resource Publications.