

Wrestling with God and the world in prayer

In Genesis 32 we learn that while wrestling with God is a good thing, it can leave you with a limp even if you are blessed. Jacob/Israel wrestled with God and the world, and he was both blessed and a blessing, and this is the case even today with modern Israel – which is still wrestling with God, still being a blessing to the nations, even if there is sin in the camp, so to speak.

The striking passage in Hosea ch. 12 vv.3-5 confirms the story of Jacob's wrestling with God – perhaps in prayer – as Hosea says that Jacob “wept and sought God's favor and spoke with God” – and God reveals God's self there as “us,” the Lord of Hosts. Perhaps we need to think of prayer as a kind of wrestling, seeking God's face while keenly aware of both our dignity and our frailty.

The church may need to wrestle with God more than it does at present, even if this implies a tension in the relationship. The church needs to plead for God's reality and God's perspective, especially in the light of structural and institutional sin, both in the world and in the church. It is only through this wrestling kind of prayer that the church will be able to see God's face, know God's will, and change accordingly.

Paradoxically, we the Church are the bride of Christ, Israel (spiritual or fleshly) is the adopted child of God, but we also are an adopted child, grafted into the family. We can be confident, as a member of the family, like David, who prayed in confidence that he was righteous – but we need to look at ourselves carefully. David was confident that he would see God's face, and we too can be confident as we wrestle with God, seeking His will and His blessing, in reverent awe. The family that wrestles together, stays together? Yes.

In the related Matthew 14 passage, the dynamic goes in the other direction, and I see a kind of wrestling challenge being given to the disciples, as Jesus says to them, facing a hungry crowd “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They are not up to the task yet, so the grieving healer, our Lord, takes the situation in hand and brings order, fairness and blessing to the multitudes. People are arranged in groups, the feeding is orderly and fair, and even the leftover food can be collected. Is this how Jesus wrestled with the future leaders of the church? He challenged them, then showed them how to take up the challenge and bring order and blessing to the situation. We need to see and hear His challenge and seek the answer to it for today.