Lord, may I speak the words you want me to speak, may we hear the words that you want us to hear. ***Amen***

What keeps you awake at night?

- Is it worries for *the future*? Do you worry about climate change, or about war, or about politics?
- Is it worries *for now*: about your family and how things will work out for them?
- Is it worries about *the past*: regrets for things you said, or did, or maybe didn't say or do.

Why are these worries so much worse at night?
I think our Old Testament reading today is a story of night time worries and fears. Jacob, you may remember, tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the inheritance that should have gone to his brother Esau. Jacob then fled for his fear of his life, and ended up working for Laban, and marrying two of his daughters. There he tricked Laban out of much of his wealth and then sets off to return to his brother Esau and ask for forgiveness.

Jacob's story - As Jacob's journey back to his brother draws to an end, Jacob begins to be anxious about how Esau will react. His fear surrounds him like dark despair, and comes to a climax on the very last night of his return in the reading we have just heard. Jacob's story resonates with our own experience of night-time sleeplessness when our worries seem more intense than they do in the day.

Jacob is alone. He has sent on his family and his wealth ahead of him. He is no longer protected by riches, or the love of his wives and his children. He is quite alone with his fears and his guilt about how he treated his father, his brother, his father-in-law, even his wives. We can see ourselves in this solitude too – however much we surround ourselves with family and friends and good things, at the end of the day, in the quiet of the night, we are alone with our thoughts. We rerun in our mind the things we are ashamed of, the words we wish we had not said, the moments we wished the ground would open up and swallow us, the opportunities to be kind that we missed.

And into Jacob's dark loneliness comes a man who wrestles with him. We are told absolutely nothing about this man, not where he comes from, not what he looks like, certainly not who he is. Nor are we told why the wrestle. It's probably not my first reaction to meeting a stranger in the night.

The story is clear, however, that afterwards, Jacob was sure he had encountered God. Did he recognise in his opponent something of the experience with the angels ascending and descending on a ladder that marked the beginning of his journey into the desert? Was Jacob asking the stranger – why did I treat my family like that? How can I begin again? How can I show Esau that I have changed?

Then, as the first glimmers of dawn start to show, the unknown man asks to be let go. All the sights and sounds and activities of the day starts to flood upon Jacob's senses, but he is not yet ready to face the day and to finally meet his estranged brother. He longs to be a different person – not the selfish trickster who may be rejected, but a loyal brother who never went away, for his life to be anything than the life it now is. So he asks the stranger for a blessing.

And what came next? In response to Jacob's request, his opponent leaves him with three things.
Firstly, a new name, Israel, literally, "one who strives with God." It's a new beginning, a new legacy. Jacob the cheat and the trickster is given a new start. It will as Israel that he will father the twelve sons, including Joseph, who will end up in Egypt, and set the scene for the Exodus, the crossing of the red sea, forty years in the wilderness and the arrival in the promised land. It is the beginning of a very big story, and it begins here.

Secondly, Jacob is left with a pain in his hip that will be with him all his life as a lifelong reminder of his encounter, and a reminder that this new start comes at cost.

Thirdly, the stranger does indeed bless Jacob. And this blessing, unlike the one he tricked out of his father Isaac or is currently trying to extract from his brother Esau with generous gifts. Jacobs wins this blessing by his efforts alone, in the night, in the dark, when he wrestled and struggled.

In later life Jacob was sure that this night-time experience was an encounter with God, and that is why he called the place "Peniel" which means "the face of God". It is a truly remarkable story among all the Old Testament history of encounters with God.

- Moses asked to see God: he hid in a cleft of a rock and saw only God's *back parts*, not his face, pass by. Even so, Moses' face shone with the reflected glory.
- When Elijah encountered God, he was hiding in a cave with his own face wrapped in mantle, so that he heard the still small voice, but did not see God at all
- But Jacob saw God's face. He saw God's face in struggle and in wrestling. In facing the deepest questions about himself, alone and in despair. And he was forever changed by the encounter.

And out of that came the possibilities of a new beginning.

This is not a true story: in the sense that a man called Jacob had precisely these experiences. It's not even a very sensible story – why wrestle with a stranger in the night? Why want to hang ion and not let go? Why ask for a blessing? It's as if there is so much more story hiding in the pauses between sentences and that is lost to us.
But it is a true-to-life story, it's a legend, a myth… It shows us that an encounter with God will mark us always, change us, make possible a new beginning and bring us great blessing.

What did Jesus say?
Someone else with a struggle on her hands is the widow in the gospel reading. In this story Jesus contrasts the widow's dogged determination to achieve her aim, with that of a lazy jobsworth who enjoys the respect that goes with the title of judge, but actually only wants an easy life and doesn't care what the actual outcome is.

Unlike the Jacob story, the judge doesn't represent God: instead, he stands for our own worst selves. The parable describes the internal struggle we have with ourselves when we would rather do the easy thing than the right thing. And you don't need me to spell out what those are for you.

Jesus tells this story in the days before holy week, and so it forms part of the last-minute instructions Jesus is giving to his disciples. He wants them to understand that staying loyal to him in the days ahead, following him in the years ahead, living his message in the lifetime ahead, will not be easy. They, like us, are going to have to work for God's kingdom. That is why the parable ends, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Today we have had the stories of three people praying and three prayers. Three people naming their deepest desires.

- Firstly, we have Jacob who prayed for courage to face his brother and be reconciled:
- Secondly, we have the widow prayed that right would be done.
- And thirdly, the judge, who wished for a quiet life that he could enjoy alone.

Jesus asks us whose prayer is most like our own? He asks if we

- long for God's kingdom to come and to live well with all our neighbours,
- **or** are we praying to be left alone to get on with our own good life and not be bothered by others?

One of these prayers will be a struggle like Jacob's.
One of these prayers will make its mark on us, so that we are forever changed.
One of these prayers will not be easy.
And in *only one of these* prayers, will we *see God's face* and *receive his blessing*.
Thanks be to God.