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Jacob meets Esau again. The High Priestly Prayer.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 33. And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants.

And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.

When Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children he said, Who are these with you? Jacob said, The children whom God has graciously given your servant. Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down.

And last, Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, What do you mean by all this company that I met? Jacob answered, To find favour in the sight of my Lord. But Esau said, I have enough my brother, keep what you have for yourself.

Jacob said, No, please, if I have found favour in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. Please accept my blessing that has brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.

Thus he urged him, and he took it. Then Esau said, Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you. But Jacob said to him, My Lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me.

If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my Lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me, and at the pace of the children, until I come to my Lord in Seir. So Esau said, Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.

But he said, What need is there? Let me find favour in the sight of my Lord. So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock.

Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth. And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan Aram, and he camped before the city. And from the sons of Hamor Shechem's father he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent.

There he erected an altar, and called it El Elohe Israel. In Genesis chapter 33 Jacob has just been blessed by the angel after wrestling with him and has been given a new name. Maybe at this point it would be worth just commenting upon the importance of the angel.

Later on when he blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob references the angel who has redeemed him from evil. The angel is a figure who seems to play an important role within the story of Jacob, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. The angel appears to Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre.

The angel is the one who interrupts just as he's about to sacrifice Isaac. And the angel here seems to be a divine figure, a figure who's associated with Yahweh himself. And so it's not surprising that people have reflected upon the presence of the angel within the book of Genesis and elsewhere, and seen within it a reference to the second person of the Trinity.

As we look back upon these events in the light of the New Testament, there are places in the New Testament that suggest that sort of association. Jacob now lifts up his eyes and sees Esau coming with four hundred men. The expression, lifted up his eyes and looked

and behold, is used on a number of occasions in Genesis.

And in each occasion it seems to be a particularly charged one. This is a significant sight that he's seeing. Seeing Esau's company approaching him, he divides his people into four flocks, as it were, with Rachel's flock last, much as there were four flocks when Jacob first met Rachel, with Rachel's flock being the last to arrive at the closed well.

There is, however, an implicit favouritism here. The children of the maidservants are placed in the most dangerous position, Leah and her children next, and then finally in the safest position, Rachel and Joseph. It's very clear that Jacob favours Joseph over his other children, much as he favours Rachel over Leah and the handmaids.

And the favouritism that is on display here is something that has negative effects throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, not least in the chapter that follows. Jacob, however, goes before them all. He bows to the ground seven times to his brother.

But Esau's response is surprising. Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him. The word for embracing used here is not dissimilar for the word used for wrestling.

The brothers clutch each other, but it is a brotherly embrace, not a wrestling move as they might have had in the past. Esau falls on the part of the neck which Jacob had once covered up with goatskin to imitate him and kisses it, much as their father had kissed Jacob in his blessing. And previous to this, there have been two cases of people lifting up their voices and weeping, separated from each other.

After he loses the blessing, Esau lifts up his voice and weeps. And then when Jacob meets Rachel, he lifts up his voice and weeps. The two brothers, both lifting up their voice and weeping, but separated from each other.

But now the two brothers weep together, like twins who have just been reborn. And Jacob insists that Esau accept the princely gift that he has sent on ahead of him, all the flocks and the livestock. And being willing to surrender such an extensive amount of his property is a sign of Jacob's trust in God as the true source of his provision.

He's able to live as a wanderer and as someone who holds his possessions lightly because he knows that God is the one who will provide for him. And Jacob also repeatedly refers to Esau as his Lord and himself as Esau's servant. And here it is very important to note that Jacob is performing to Esau the blessing that he took from him.

If you look back in Genesis chapter 27, this is the blessing that is given to Jacob. See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine.

Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be Lord over your brothers and may

your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you.

So what we're seeing here is Jacob performing to Esau the blessing that he once took from him. It's a very significant and powerful action and he's able to do this to give back the blessing as he has been blessed and named by God himself. And he explicitly calls it a blessing that he wants Esau to accept the blessing that he's given.

Earlier on in chapter 30, Rachel overcame the rivalry between herself and Leah, giving to Leah what her father originally stole from her with Leah, the marriage bed of Jacob. And now Jacob does something similar, healing a past wrong. Note that in verse 10, Jacob declares that he has seen Esau's face, which is like seeing the face of God.

Now Jacob has just seen God face to face and named Peniel after that encounter. What is going on here? What is the allusion back to the previous chapter doing here? First of all, we need to recognize that the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, etc. is an entire story.

It's not just lots of episodic events as you might see in an older TV show. This is a consistent story and themes recur and things that happen are connected to things that have happened before. So this story is connected to the previous chapter and it's connected to all these other events that have gone before.

The stealing of the blessing. It's going back also to the events of the womb. These events need to be brought to mind if we're going to understand what's happening here between the two brothers.

So why the reference to seeing the face of Esau like the face of God? He has wrestled with God and been spared and now he sees his brother and he's spared again. And there's a recognition, I believe, of God's favor in the favor of Esau. It connects the story with that which precedes it, but also connects the recognition that arose from that story.

You have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed. And Jacob is now meeting his brother and he's seeing in the peace with which his brother meets him, the peace and the favor of God himself. And so as he sees the peaceful face of his brother, his enemy throughout the story to this point, he recognizes that ultimately this is about God's favor.

It's not just Esau. This is God's favor that he's experiencing. And he's able to look at these events in a new light after he has had that encounter at Peniel.

Once he has seen the face of God, he is able to look at human faces and see that in those human faces, God is at work relating to him through these people. Esau offers to journey with Jacob, but Jacob turns down the offer. However, he's no longer competing to go out first as he was in the womb.

Esau says, let me go on ahead. And Jacob doesn't stop him. He can go on ahead.

He's not going to grab the heel anymore. He suggests that he will visit Seir in time. And the impression is given that Esau has by this point taken some sort of kingly position in the land of Seir for himself, rising to some measure of power.

He also turns down Esau's offer of a bodyguard to be left with his company. And after having done all of this, Jacob comes to Succoth and builds a house and some booths for his cattle. Once again, this may seem to be a strange, incidental detail.

Why mention the building of a house at a place called Succoth? Well, if we read the story of the Exodus, it is a place called Succoth that is the first place that Israel goes to after leaving Egypt. It's the place where they leave behind the houses in which they've celebrated Passover and dwell in booths. It seems as if what's happening here for Jacob has a certain symmetry or similarity with what's happening with Israel later on.

Jacob has undergone his own Exodus experience. He's been reduced in status. He's been mistreated.

He's been abused by someone who used to be favorable towards him. And then God is with him. God brings him out.

He's pursued. There's a showdown. And then there's also this struggle at the crossing of the water.

And now that he's come out, he's going through other Exodus patterns. And here I think Israel is supposed to look back at characters like Jacob, as they do with Abraham, and see in these characters their own experience to recognize that what they're experiencing later on in history has resemblance with what their forefathers experienced. They are walking in the footsteps of their ancestors.

After this, he goes on to Shechem and buys the second tract of land that Israel owns within Canaan. No longer is it just the cave and field of Machpelah. He also owns this place near Shechem.

Shechem is another significant site in the story of Abraham. It's the first place that he goes to in the land, near the Oak of Moreh, and there he builds an altar. And Jacob follows the same pattern.

He arrives at this place. He pitches his tent. He buys the land.

And then he erects an altar and names it, for God, the God of Israel. This is a site that is, again, putting down roots in the land, anticipating the fulfillment of the promise that God first made at that place of Shechem to Abraham, that his descendants would own that land. And so, in that place, Jacob buys a tract of land.

A question to consider. In the story of this chapter, we see a transformation in the relationship between Esau and Jacob. A transformation that is made possible in large measure because of a prior transformation in the way that Jacob sees God's action and presence in his circumstances.

The changed way that he relates to God after wrestling with him enables him to change the way that he relates to other people. I would encourage you to reflect closely upon the difference that is made and how exactly that difference is made. How does this encounter enable him to change the way that he views everything that has happened to him prior to that point? And the way that he relates to people going forward? One further detail of the story to reflect upon.

Jacob buys a parcel of land near Shechem. This is not the only time that we hear about this parcel of land. It's mentioned again at the end of the book of Joshua, where a significant event happens there.

What is that event? And why do you think it happens at that site? John chapter 17. And they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you. And they have believed that you sent me.

I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me.

I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth.

Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in

them, and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and love them, even as you love me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

O righteous father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. John 17, commonly called the High Priestly Prayer of Christ, is perhaps one of the most moving and powerful passages in all of scripture.

In it, the son addresses the father, speaking of his relationship with us, his people, as something that is implicated in his loving bond with his father. There are various passages from scripture in the background to this, for instance the relationship between the son of man and the ancient of days in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13-14. There have been anticipations of this great prayer earlier in the gospel, in chapter 11 verses 41-42, and then also in chapters 12, 27-28.

It's also reminiscent of the beginning of chapter 13, where Christ first addresses himself to his disciples. In that context, Christ realising that his hour has come, that he's about to go to the father, that everything's about to be fulfilled, takes up the cloth and starts wiping his disciples' feet. And there begins the conversation that he has with his disciples in the farewell discourse.

Here we have another passage introduced with a similar set of statements. Christ's recognition that the hour has come, and now rather than directing his attention to his disciples, he speaks to his father. Perhaps we should see here something of the two-fold aspect of the cross of Christ.

First of all, as an action directed to his disciples in washing their feet, that he is laying aside his garments, he's serving them and he's ministering to them. But then also that he's addressing himself to his father, that the event of the cross is an event of glorification. It's an event where he's going to be glorified by the father and lifted up.

He's going to present himself to the father and be raised up to the father's presence. And so both aspects of the cross are in play in chapters 13 to 17. And whereas we've seen the first part of that more clearly in chapter 13, now we see Christ addressing himself to the father in the glorification of the cross, the lifting up to God's presence coming to the foreground at this point.

There are other ways in which we might see this prayer as having a lot of parallels with the Lord's Prayer. Our Father who art in heaven, Christ lifts up his eyes to heaven and says, Father, hallowed be your name. Glorify your son so that your son may glorify you.

Your kingdom come. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

You can think of deliver us from evil, praying that he would keep them from the evil one. And there are a lot of other parallels that we can see if we look deeper. What's the point of such parallels? Well, I think within them we can recognize the way that, first of all, our prayers resemble, participate, correspond with and function with the prayer of Christ for us.

Christ is here interceding for his flock and Christ's relationship with his Father is one that we participate in. That the love with which the Father has for the Son is the love with which he loves us. That we can speak to the Father in the name of Christ and have the access that he enjoys.

And so we see participation. But we also see the way in which Christ is praying for the fulfillment of his own kingdom. He's praying that something that we pray for in a different way as his people, that he's praying for it in heaven.

So our prayers are accompanied by Christ's prayers for us and for his kingdom in heaven. When we pursue the kingdom of God, we're not pursuing it alone. Rather, we're joining with the prayer of Christ to the Father.

And so when we pray in Christ's name, it's not just that we're having access in his name. Rather, we're joining our prayers with his. Once again, Jesus refers to his coming death, not just to the resurrection and the ascension that follow it, as a glorification.

That he will be glorified in what's about to take place. He speaks of being given authority overall for the sake of his people. Now often when we think about the authority of Christ, we think about the authority of Christ with relationship to his people as an authority that he exercises over us.

That Christ tells us what to do and we obey. But yet, here it speaks about Christ being given authority overall so that he might give eternal life to all who have been given to him. That authority has been given to him and is exercised for our sake in order that we might come to participate in eternal life.

And what is this life? Christ describes it as to know the only true God and Jesus Messiah he has sent. These two things are directly connected. We know the revealed Father in the revealing Son.

And to know God is to know God in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. To know the Messiah is to know the Father, as Jesus talks about earlier in his conversation with Thomas. This passage stresses that the disciples are given to him by the Father.

The church is a gift of love from the Father to the Son in the Spirit. And as such, we are implicated in the bond of love of the Trinity itself. The disciples have kept God's word and have arrived at a true knowledge of Christ and of his mission.

They know that he has been sent from God. Now, remember as we've been looking through the Gospel of John, that's been a returning theme. Where did Christ come from? From whom has he been sent? The Jews fail to recognise, the people just can't see the true nature of his origins.

But the disciples have. And with this knowledge, they've arrived at the point where they can move forward. And this is a source of joy for Christ, that the time for his glorification has now arrived because his mission has been realised in that these disciples now recognise the truth of his origin.

Jesus proceeds to speak of the intimate relationship between his possession and the Father's possession. What's Christ's is the Father's. And what belongs to the Father is Christ's.

There could not be a closer relationship between the two. We need to read this against the background of the Old Testament, where God declares forcefully in places like Isaiah that he will not give his glory to another. That his name is above all other names and at that name, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess.

Now, this is the name that Christ enjoys. This is the glory that is given to Christ. And so the way that Christ speaks of himself here is a claim to deity.

It's very clearly filling out the picture that we've seen elsewhere in the Gospel, where Christ is identified with the Father in a way that's closer than just one that's sent on a very important mission. Christ and the Father are one, as it speaks about here. Jesus declares that he is no longer in the world.

He is on the way out of the world. He's going to go to the Father and yet his disciples will be left in the world. While he was in the world, he protected his disciples, guarding them from the evil one by his teaching and his practice.

And only Judas fell away, but did so in fulfilment of Scripture. And note the reference to the Son of Perdition here, that this is found elsewhere in Scripture in 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 3. It seems to be an eschatological figure that is anticipated and is fulfilled both in Christ's immediate mission, but then also later on in the events running up to AD 70, perhaps, which I think are probably in view in 2 Thessalonians. I think what we see here is perhaps an example of those cases where there is a pattern played out in history and it plays out on a number of occasions.

There will be Judas characters later on in the story, later on in the run up to AD 70, and maybe also later on in the run up to the final coming of Christ. The disciples remain in

the world, but they're not rooted in the world. It's no longer the site that they find their foundation and their true belonging.

They're hated by the world, like Christ, because they are not of it, but they are sent into the world by him. Christ sanctifies himself for us, going to the cross, and he does so in order that we might be sanctified by God's truth. He prays not just for his immediate disciples, but for all who will believe through their testimony.

This prayer extends not just to the immediate 12 apostles, but it extends to us as well, those who have believed through the apostolic testimony. At later points in John's Gospel, we'll also see the Gospel writer turn to us and look us in the eye and tell us that these things are written so that we might believe. This is part of the Gospel that is spoken concerning us.

We should see ourselves in here and recognise that it is addressing our situation. Christ prays that his disciples and the ones that believe through their word will be one. This isn't primarily about ecumenism and about a unified church in visible institutions.

It's primarily about the shared roots of our union with God. Our shared union with and in God is the basis of our union with each other. It's important to get the order right here.

We look to God for our union by faith, not primarily to a more visible church union on earth. As our union with the Father and the Son in the Spirit and with each other in the Triune God is made manifest, people will believe that Jesus was sent by the Father. So the unity of the church is important, but that visible unity must be grounded in that deeper unity, the unity that we have in the Triune God.

That is the true unity that Christ prays for here. Christ gives the glory and the love that the Father gives and shares with him to his disciples. And it seems to me that this is a reference to the Spirit, that the gift of the Spirit is the gift of the union of love and the glory of the Triune God to his people.

That in that union of the Spirit, we might enjoy that glory and the love with which the Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world. A question to reflect upon. In this chapter, there are a great many references to the Father and the Son and the different part that they play in our redemption.

We also see allusions, I believe, to the Spirit, which I've already mentioned. Putting the various parts of this picture together, what are the ways in which each person of the Trinity is involved in the constitution of the church as the people of God within the witness of this chapter?