

# WHAT WE HAVE BECOME

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Coming home! How marvellous to be coming home after a long period away. A chance to visit the old places and the people among whom you grew up. A chance to remember what you used to be and to show off what you are. Coming home! How marvellous! Or would it be? On second thoughts might not it not be a difficult thing to do? What would those you used to know really think of what you'd become? How would you really feel if you found yourself comparing the hopes and dreams you had when you were young with the present reality? Coming home might not be easy.

It wasn't easy for Jacob. In fact for him coming home was a very difficult experience indeed. Years earlier he had made the journey in the other direction, crossing the River Jordan with nothing more than his staff. Now, coming home, he's rich. He has he-goats, she-goats, ewes and rams. He has bulls and cows. He has male and female slaves. And there are his two wives, Rachel and Leah, with their children. He's done well as Jacob. But for all that he is deeply uneasy. Jacob carries excess baggage- guilt-laden memories. He'd give the world to deny it but he cannot: he knows he has cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright: he knows he has fooled his blind father, Isaac, and conned his father in law Laban, out of just about everything that couldn't be nailed down. And to Jacob's credit he also knows that the truths he has so-long evaded have to be faced if he is to enjoy a home-coming not only with his brother Esau, but, more importantly with God.

Before he can face what's coming he has to be alone. It makes sense: think of Jesus in the wilderness or alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sometimes you have to be alone and go through an inner wrestling before you can face what you know you must. That night, alone on the banks of the river, Jacob wrestled his demons, what he'd done, how he's failed. In the presence of God he seeks forgiveness and finds it. There by the brook he changes the direction of his life. Having wrestled with God Jacob is given a new name Israel, a name his descendants still carry to this day. And now he can go on and be reconciled to Esau and life can begin again.

Which leaves me wondering about us. Supposing we were to make the journey home, would we find it easy or difficult? Like Jacob are there people in our past who we've hurt or failed? How do we compare with what we'd hoped we'd be?

The story is told of a rich man who went to heaven, and was shown some of the mansions belonging to poor people and he thought to himself if this is how the poor live what's my house going to be like? When the angel stopped at a hovel and said "this is yours!" the man was dumbfounded. But the angel touched him on the shoulder and explained "You see" he said "you didn't send us enough material to build anything better". The question is us and what we have become. Coming home to God means facing that question.

If we have to ask it as individuals perhaps as a society we have to ask it too. We all at the moment coming to terms with the reality of suicide bombers on the streets of London. Well that gives us all sorts of questions to ask about how we have got to this point. One of the justifications given for the Iraq war was that it would make the world safer from terrorism.

Well has it done that? Or has our foreign policy actually deepened the very problem it set out to solve?

Or let me an ever more basic question. Have we got it right about the kind of country we are? A couple of days after the first bombing I was going through Kings Cross. Outside the station there were the flowers and there was the Union Jack. And looking at it I found myself asking what does it mean to be British? Some might define national identity by race and ethnicity – but the British has always been diverse nation. Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Danes, Normans, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Huguenots, Jews. Since the Second World War the mix has got richer. West Indians, Indians, Sri Lankans, Africans - all those 30 nationalities that make up Trinity Church and many more. I rejoice in all this - this diversity is part of what makes this the most exciting city in the country and one of the most exciting in the world. Please don't send me back to Swindon.

But if race and ethnicity does not define us a nation what does? That's a question which for quite a while we have been almost afraid to ask. If you an American you may come from any where in the world but there's a pride in being an American that holds the nation together. What are the values which shape our national identity and which all citizens can share so that they become a unifying and strengthening force? In an increasingly insecure world people need to be rooted and to draw strength from shared purpose. What is ours?

My sense is that partly out of post-colonial guilt we have lost the ability to answer that question. But you can't have 100 nationalities and half a dozen religions living together as one unless there is a common sense of what makes us all, if we choose in these islands, proud to be British. Our future depends upon us rediscovering from our history the shared values that bind us together and on us becoming more explicit about what we stand for as a nation.

Let me give 3 basic British values:

Firstly: a passion for liberty- we do not expect to be told by governments what we must do. We have a concern for liberty running from Magna to the Second World War.

Secondly: a commitment to parliamentary government and the rule of law – Westminster is the mother of Parliaments.

Thirdly: a sense of tolerance and fair play.

Today to draw on now on those values as we face the challenge of terrorism. Terrorism threatens our safety – but any response to it must not take away the very liberty that defines this nation in the first place. We need a dialogue with those who want to be part of this nation – on the one hand these values by which we live and we shall not be changing them. On the other those who come from Africa or Asia need to challenge about the empty materialism which fills our life.

Like Jacob we need to do some wrestling in the presence of God. We have to face rather than flee the issue of us and of what we have become. And as we do let me share with you a text from John "We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love one another." Biblically coming home to God always leads to a new way of treating others. In Jacob's case he goes from his meeting with God to be reconciled with his brother Esau. For all of us a real

meeting with God means living with a respect for other and a new sensitivity in the way we treat them.

In his book "The Different Drummer" Scott Peck tells a story is about a monastery had fallen on hard times. Once a great order now all its branch houses were lost, there were only 5 monks left in the mother house, the abbot and 4 others, all of them over 70. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day it occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the rabbi could offer any advice that might save the order. The rabbi welcomed the abbot and commiserated. "I know how it is" he said "The spirit has gone out of people. Almost no-one comes to the synagogue anymore". So the old rabbi and the old abbot wept together, and they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things.

The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It's been wonderful being with you," said the abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?" "No, I'm sorry" the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you that one of you is going to be the greatest religious leader of our generation".

When the other monks heard the rabbi's words they wondered what possible significance they might have. "The greatest religious leader of our generation, one of us here at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Of course – it must be the abbot, who has been our leader for so long. On the other hand he might have meant Brother Thomas, who certainly is a holy man. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod, who is so crotchety, but then Elrod is virtually always right.. Surely he couldn't have meant Brother Philip- he's too passive. But then he's always there when you need him. Of course he didn't mean me- yet supposing he did? O God not me! I couldn't be the one, could I"?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off-chance that one of them might be the greatest religious leader of their generation. And on the off-off-chance that each monk himself might be the holy one, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Because the forest in which they were situated was beautiful, people occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks and began to come more frequently, bringing friends with them. Then some of the younger men who came to visit started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he might join. Then another, then another. So within a few years the monastery had again become a thriving order, and thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant community that was influencing for good the whole community around.

Today that story might be a good one for us all to ponder. If there's going to hope for nation and world don't we have to learn to show respect for each other whoever we may be? Says John "We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love one another." If like Jacob we will take time to be God and wrestle with who are we are and what we have become then we know God's blessing will rest upon us. "Return to your country and your kindred, and I will do you good".

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