This story we have heard read from Genesis 32 is one of the strangest but most fascinating stories in Scripture, I think. If you want to follow it with me, it’s on page 32 of the pew Bibles.

It is a story that has puzzled commentators for many centuries and it’s one of those stories that, if you read 10 theologians opinions on it, you will come up with 12 different interpretations! There is an air of mystery surrounding the story, which is in keeping with the narrative itself. It is a strange encounter and we are left with more questions than answers…

I’m not sure that I can buck that trend and give any more definitive answers about what this text is all about. But on a personal level, it is one that I have come back to time and time again in my life because it seems to me to have a great deal to say about personal struggle and what happens to us as individuals when we face trauma and difficulties in life.

Many of us here today will have been through deep traumas in life. Perhaps some of us are gong through deep traumas at the moment. And what I don’t want to do – what I will never do - is offer trite answers that seek to defend God in the face of our sufferings. As many of us will know, when we suffer deep trauma, often there are no answers at all: we just need to grit our teeth and get through it. Survival is good enough. And what we don’t need is someone trying to theologise our pain and get us to look on the spiritual bright side of life.

Pain and trauma are pain and trauma. It is a dark place to be and sometimes we just need to be able to sit in the darkness and survive the darkness.

So I am not using this story to give us any answers this morning. Instead, I just want to make some general observations about the relationship between spirituality and pain - and each one of us needs to do with this story what we want…

It is a strange story…

Jacob is wrestling with a man – but we aren’t ever told who this man is. We are just left with the assumption that he is either God or a messenger from God: certainly that was Jacob’s analysis of the situation.

And there is a sort of in-built mystery to this story because it all takes place in the darkness, at night. And because it was dark, we don’t know anything about the appearance of the man. At no point is there any description of him. And we are not given any description about the fight either: in fact, it appears that they were fighting together for a great many hours but all we are told, in verse 24, is a very simple statement: “And a man wrestled with him until daybreak”. The ultimate minimalist description of an incredibly intense and intimate encounter…

The whole event is shrouded in mystery: an event in the darkness, an event without any adequate description whatsoever…But in the hiddeness of this story, there are some really important observations, I think, about how we cope with trauma in our own lives.

And the first point to make is that, actually, I think the lack of detail in this story is one of the most important aspects of it. What we want, of course, is clarity; we want to know all the details, we want to know the identity of the man, we want to know the reason why this wrestling match was happening in the first place, we want to know exactly how the wrestling happened, what the ebb and flow of the battle was and how long it lasted for. Instead, we are left to sit with the mystery of it.

And that, I think reflects something of the nature of trauma itself. Because when we experience trauma and go through periods of deep suffering, we are often confronted by emotional enemies we can’t really see. We contend with emotions we can’t name. We have fears for the future that we can’t describe. Very often, during times of deep suffering, we feel completely and utterly in the dark. We have to do battle against very strong emotions and none of it seems to make any sense at all. “Why do I feel like this? Why did this happen to me? Why did this happen to the person I love?” The battle against trauma and suffering is so often a shadowy one, a mysterious one, a battle fought in the darkness of the human psyche.

But this story of Jacob wrestling tells us, that even in the darkness of suffering, even in the shadowy nature of emotional pain, God is still there with us.

If Jacob’s analysis was right – and this man was God himself - then we know that God is with each one of us in the darkness of our emotional struggle. And that as we wrestle, so God wrestles too; as we hurt, so God hurts with us too. Our struggle is his struggle and his struggle is our struggle: we are united with God in the wrestling match…

But I think the next observation we have about this story is equally important, and it is simply this: that there is a conversation going on between Jacob and the man with whom he wrestles.

Three times during this encounter, they speak with each other. Firstly, in verse 26, the man asks Jacob to let him go but Jacob refuses to do so unless he first gets a blessing. Secondly, in verse 27, the man asks Jacob his name. Thirdly, in verse 29, Jacob asks the man what his name is. Three times, in the midst of the struggle, there is dialogue between the two of them.

And this is important for us because it reminds us that. in the midst of our sufferings and trauma, we are able to talk with God and he listens to us. And also that, if we listen carefully, God is talking to us too.

When we are experiencing deep trauma we can feel so very alone: no-one can understand the depths of our emotions, no-one truly understands how we feel, and no matter how much we try to explain to others, words are always inadequate. We talk to others, and others talk to us and there is some degree of comfort, of course. But we are still often left with a deep emptiness inside that no amount of human words can speak into.

Trauma is a lonely business.

But the conversations in this story remind us that, in the midst of our struggles, we can talk with God and he will talk with us. We are not alone in our suffering; God is there with us, and we can communicate with him at any time through prayer.

Interestingly, of course, Jacob doesn’t always get the answer he is looking for. In fact, when he asks the man his name, the man completely avoids the question and doesn’t come close to giving the answer Jacob is looking for. And so it is with us when we pray during times of suffering: we can ask questions of God and often we don’t get the answer we are looking for or, indeed, any answer at all it seems…

But the important thing is the dialogue; that the communication continues - because all the while the talking continues, the relationship remains intact. When we stop talking to God and when we stop listening for his voice, it is then that the relationship crumbles and we truly are left alone in the darkness.

So we keep talking, we keep listening for God, no matter how breathless we are, no matter how tiring the wrestling has become…

Keep talking. Keep listening. Keep the relationship alive.

First then, this story reminds us that God is with us in our experience of the mystery of suffering.

Second, even though we may feel alone and completely misunderstood, we can still cry out to God and he hears us and if we listen carefully, we may even discern the voice of God speaking to us.

Thirdly, this story tells us that through the bitterest experiences in life, God transforms us and gives us real hope for the future.

Now please hear me properly on this. I am not coming up with a trite theology that says something like, “God works good out of every suffering” or even worse, “Be pleased when you suffer because God is going to do something wonderful in your life”. Those sorts of ideas are not good theology. Even worse, there is something quite cruel about creating a false theology that does not take the bitterness of our pain seriously.

I am not suggesting for one moment that God brings us suffering in order to help us grow as human beings. What I am saying is that suffering, sadly, is part of the stuff of life; we all suffer, we all face trauma, there is no avoiding it - but our sufferings and traumas, as dark as they are, need not be states of complete and utter hopelessness. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we can glimpse the compassion of God and as we do, we can be transformed.

As we reach the conclusion of this story, in verse 28, Jacob is given a new name. We read: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” He started out in this story with the name ‘Jacob’. And he ends up in this story with the name ‘Israel’.

We know, don’t we, that in Biblical times and throughout the Biblical stories, a name is more than just a name. Instead, it tells us something about the character of the person. Well, the name ‘Jacob’ means ‘cheater’ – he who cheats. But the name ‘Israel’ means ‘God protects’. And so the change in name indicates a transformation of character through the battle as Jacob, the cheater, becomes Israel, the one protected by God. Jacob has been transformed by the struggle and he is now a person who sits under the protection of God. Through the struggle, he has changed and his relationship with God has been transformed.

For all of us who have experienced major traumas in our lives, we can testify to the fact that we are not the same person now as we were before. All of us have been transformed and changed through our sufferings. But the promise of God to us through this story is that, if we turn to God in the midst of our sufferings, we can be transformed for the better.

Jacob wrestled with God. He questioned God. He showed passion and anger and even ferocity towards God as he wrestled. But he kept talking to him and kept his face turned towards God and in that act, he was transformed for the better. So we realise from this passage that God is with us in our experience of the mystery of suffering; that even though we might feel alone, God hears us in our pain and even speaks to us and that we can know the transformative power of God at work in our lives if we keep our face turned towards him in our struggles. There is hope, even in the darkest moments of our lives.

But there’s just one more really important point that I want to draw out from this story, from verse 31: “The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip”. Jacob becomes Israel. He receives God’s blessing and he is a transformed character because of the struggle. But he walks away with a limp.

Jacob had been hurt by the struggle and he would carry a limp with him for the rest of his life as a result of the trauma he had been through. Quite literally, his trauma had been a crippling encounter and so is trauma for many of us too.

But Jacob, or Israel as he now is, walks with a limp almost as a sign of victory, not defeat: he has wrestled with God and he has received a blessing and his limp is a permanent reminder to him and to others of the battle he has been through. And no doubt, he became a more compassionate man as a result of his limp, which was his daily reminder of the struggle he had endured.

And so his limp becomes part of his character and in the same way, the crippling that we receive as a result of our traumas becomes an integral part of who we are. Our crippling is not to be denied or hidden away: it is part of who we are - and we must learn to own our pain and, at times, to wear it well.

But even though Jacob wears his pain in a most visible way, he doesn’t let it define who he is. He is not defined by his limp – he is defined by his new name: Israel. There is a temptation for us, when we have been through a deep trauma, to allow it to define us and shape the rest of our life unalterably. But our limp does not define us – it merely refines us. What defines us is our relationship with the God who has transformed us and given us a new name and under whose protection we now sit. Yes, we may limp for the rest of our lives but we are defined by our knowledge and experience of the love and protection of Almighty God. Jacob’s God. Israel’s God. Our God. The God who protects…

So wherever you may be in the struggle - whether you are still fighting in the darkness, whether you are currently asking the questions of God, or whether you have walked away from the struggle now but carrying a limp as a result - the promise that comes to us from this story is that each one of us may know afresh the transforming and healing love of the God who protects and leads each one of us into a new future.