
JACOB AND THE PANDEMIC

Hello to you all from a (predictably) wet Carlisle. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Steve Moore, I'm married to the lovely Claire, we have a very enthusiastic 2-year-old boy called Zach and are looking forward to the imminent arrival of a little girl (mid-August). Hebron Aberdeen holds a very special place in our heart, it's where we met, it's where we got married, and it's where I worked for 3 ½ years as a fresh-faced graduate. Seven years ago(!), we moved south of the border to Carlisle where I am on staff at a church which shares the same name. Claire works as the French Editorial Coordinator for Langham Partnership, helping publish theological material for Francophone Africa.

Being asked to write a devotion for a church we have such fond memories of allowed me to take a trip down memory lane to the fondest of them all, our wedding day. In the side hall at Denburn (the church was still being renovated at that point) before God, our family and our friends, we committed our lives to one another. Imagine for a second that having said 'I do' we walked down the aisle, got to the front door and went our separate ways. Married in name but failing to experience the relationship that it makes possible.

Perhaps like me, these last few months, as the world has come to standstill and as our lives have been forced to adapt from what we had come to know as normal, you have found yourself wondering what God is up to in all this. This past Sunday as a church we looked at the odd story of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32. A passage which describes the physical manifestation of what was going on at a spiritual level in Jacob's life, and one which bears some parallels with our own experience during this pandemic.

Jacob faced with the prospect of meeting the brother he betrayed 20 years earlier, is confronted with the folly of his self-sufficiency, something which had come to characterise his life up to this point. The foolishness of which is only highlighted by the image of a 97-year-old man wrestling with God! Self-reliance, has come to characterise our own culture, and the virus has sadly revealed in extremely painful ways that we are not in control.

Sadly, the church is not free from this delusion of autonomy. Perhaps the best litmus test for whether we depend on God or depend on ourselves is a quick assessment of

our prayer lives. Prayerlessness is what Michael Reeves calls 'practical atheism', it's living as if God does not exist. That is not to make anyone feel guilty but rather to reveal the severity of the problem. Not spending time in prayer is like saying 'I do' at the altar and 'goodbye' at the door to our new husband or wife. It fails to understand the reality of our new status, and more than that the opportunity for close relationship it provides.

I wonder if one of the things that God is doing in the midst of the pandemic is unveiling the foolishness of our self-reliance, not to laugh at us but to give us the opportunity to turn from it towards him, to take advantage of the incredible privilege we have to know the God of the universe as Father.

Many people talked before lockdown about there being more time with the restrictions being put in place. I wonder if that has been your experience? It has not been mine as I juggle church, a master's and child care, my days are in fact, more full. Time though, is not what is needed for a healthy marriage, quitting their jobs and spending every waking minute together wouldn't necessarily help a couple know one another better, what's required is quality of time, we don't (or at least we shouldn't) squeeze that in, we arrange our lives around it, we put things in place to make that quality time a reality.

As you go today, have a think through these two questions:

- What is your life built around?
- How will you, today, this week, this month ensure that you can spend quality time getting to know Jesus more?