

Meeting God in unlikely places

Genesis 28:10-22; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Winter Art Deco, Sunday 16A (19 July) 2026

Waiapu Cathedral

We meet God sometimes in unlikely places. That was Jacob's experience and maybe it's true for you as well. For some of us this building and its worship are familiar, for others – here as Winter Art Deco is being celebrated across the city – we may be more used to other places or other activities on a Sunday. If that's you and this is an unlikely place for you, I hope that you nonetheless encounter something of God today, even if you aren't expecting it.

Jacob wasn't expecting anything of the kind. He was on a journey, and the sun had set, so he made camp for the night in an unlikely patch of ground. This wasn't just any journey: Jacob was heading away from his land, on the run, having deceived his brother and alienated his family. He's hardly a model disciple at this point – or, let's face it, at almost any point in his story. Yet God comes to him. He dreams of a stairway to heaven – angels going up and down, taking messages between Jacob and God. God comes to this unlikely hero with a promise of presence: you haven't been abandoned, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Jacob awakens to the reality of God and to the sacredness of that place – "this is the gate of heaven." He awakens to a new connection with God, and to the possibility of a new future.

God met Jacob, flawed though he is – a fugitive, sent away to save his life – and connects him again to his land and his whanau. Jacob belongs in our world, the world in which nobody is perfect and no family is perfect. Because of what he's done, he's cut off from his family and alone in the world. Except that no-one is so alone in the world that God isn't with them. Jacob's story is a message of hope to all those who've somehow ended up believing we have to be perfect people in a perfect place before God will visit us. God comes anyway, God is with us anyway, present in unlikely places to the unlikeliest of people. When we hear him say, "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!" it encourages *us* to look out for signs of God's presence. They may come when we're guilty, or scared, or feeling alone, they may come when we experience the care of other people or the beauties of nature, they may come when we're asleep – but they will come, for what God says to Jacob God also says to us: Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

We get another glimpse of what it looks like when we see God in our world and what our place is in this big story when Paul expands the horizon from one human being to the whole creation. Paul acknowledges, over and over, that our world isn't perfect. When he talks about "flesh," as he does in this letter to the Romans, he's not talking about our bodies. He means a power, sin, that resists God's Spirit, something that turns us in on ourselves instead of looking to God and caring for others. And that can make for tough times, for suffering, and sometimes we bring that suffering on ourselves and on others, and on our planet.

But Paul's telling us where we belong in all this: as children and heirs of God. It's a hopeful message, a message of God's Spirit being present and active in our world. Paul's vision is profoundly cosmic: he looks beyond Jacob, beyond Israel, beyond humanity itself. He imagines creation groaning like a woman in labour, waiting for God's future to be born. The world isn't yet what God intends it to be, but neither is it abandoned. God is present in our world, working on its behalf for the renewal of creation, asking us to work too, with a hope that's neither

despair nor naïve optimism. We hope, and we work, for something we don't yet see – and sometimes that means patience and not making snap judgements.

That's where the story Jesus told in today's Gospel reading comes in. It's one of the most realistic of parables: realistic about the world we live in – the world where nothing is perfect – and very realistic about how we want to react to that. Anyone who's done any gardening – and that may be quite a few of us – knows about weeds. They creep in everywhere, and sometimes it can be pretty difficult to work out which are the weeds and which are the plants. And you don't even have to come up with an enemy to blame for the weeds: weeds just are, and are everywhere. Nothing is perfect.

When the plants came up in the field and bore grain, the weeds appeared as well. And so the slaves went to the householder and wanted to pull all the weeds up, only the householder wouldn't let them. In gathering the weeds, the good wheat would get torn up as well, so "let both of them grow together until the harvest." Gardens are like that. Life is like that. There is good and evil together and we can't always separate them, without destroying some of the good along with the evil.

The story speaks to our temptation to sort people into categories: good/bad, insider/outsider, worthy/unworthy. Sometimes we can do that to ourselves as well. But Jesus counsels patience and humility: God's reign grows in messy fields and we're not competent to judge. The story says to us that God knows we are mixed, that God can tolerate the weeds inside each of us, that God understands and somehow still loves the chronic ambiguity of human beings. That God can cope with us as we are, willing to let both grow together until the harvest. God sees more clearly than we do, and God alone can bring truth, justice, and mercy to completion. Because God sees a harvest hidden within a confused and imperfect field, and within confused and imperfect people.

That's partly the story of today, of this city, of the way Napier's Art Deco heritage emerged from catastrophe. After the 1931 earthquake, destruction was real, grief was real – and yet hope emerged and creativity followed. The Art Deco buildings are a sign that what looks like ruin isn't always the end of the story. It wasn't for this city, it wasn't for Jacob – flawed and failing as he was – and it isn't for us. Creation groans towards renewal: in 1931 people worked in hope for a new reality, and today we go on working and hoping, knowing that nothing can separate us from the divine. What God said to Jacob God also says to us: Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. For God can meet us in the unlikeliest of places, in the strangest of times, and in the most improbable people.

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