

Stairway to Heaven or Highway to Hell?

*A sermon on Genesis 28: 10-19a
for South Yarra Community Baptist Church, Sunday 23 July 2023
by Orestes Roca, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Matanzas, Cuba.*

Good evening, my sisters and brothers in the South Yarra Community Baptist Church. It is a great joy for me to share with you in this celebration. Thanks to the wonders of technology (which sometimes are not so bad), I can be with you today even though we are separated by thousands of kilometers.

I bring you greetings from the First Baptist Church of Matanzas, where I serve as pastor. Nathan has visited us twice, and he preached his first sermon in Spanish here in our church. I believe that our two churches are united by much more than just the friendship of their pastors.

As you may already have realized, it is a big challenge for me to preach in English (as it was for Nathan to preach in Spanish). I have been praying for the miracle of Pentecost so that you might understand my words. I don't know if God will grant it, but here goes!

Did you know that the Garden of Eden was in Cuba, and Adam and Eve were Cubans? No? Do you know why? Well, they had no clothes to wear, they had nothing to eat but a few fruits, they had no freedom to leave the garden, and yet with all that, they still believed they were living in paradise!

In Cuba, we joke like this all the time. One of my American friends who visited Cuba was somewhat perplexed by this, and asked me how it was possible for Cubans to keep on laughing in the midst of all their sufferings and difficulties. It's a good question. Humour is an important resource in most cultures, all over the world, but we Cubans make jokes about everything and, in particular, about the problems and challenges we face on a daily basis. It helps us to cope, and it gives us strength to go on living.

We Cubans are presently living through one of the worst periods in our history. The scarcity of basic essentials has given birth to a sense of hopelessness that has led almost 3 percent of the population to emigrate from Cuba, seeking a better life. The inability of the government to resolve the situation stirs up more discontent among the people. The authorities are responding with increased repression when faced with any criticism or show of dissent by the population. Today more than a thousand people are in prison in our country for protesting and expressing their discontent and desire for freedom. Many wonder: How long? How long? Where is God?

Our situation seems a bit like Jacob's situation in the story we heard from Genesis tonight. There are differences, of course, but Jacob too is facing one of the worst situations of his life. He is on the run, fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau, because he had stolen the birthright and blessing that traditionally belonged to Esau as Isaac's firstborn. Jacob is now running away. He is in the middle of the desert, a threatening and unfamiliar place. He is not sure of anything anymore. He doesn't know what the future holds. He is going through a time more traumatic and difficult than anything he has ever faced in his life. His world is turned upside down, and he's not sure if God is with him.

Night comes and there is nothing else to do but stop and rest. With a rock for a pillow, Jacob falls asleep and has a very strange dream. (If you sleep with your head on a rock you will probably have strange dreams too!) In his dream Jacob sees staircase that goes from earth to heaven, and there are angels going up and down the stairs.

Being a great lover of classic rock music, when I read of Jacob's vision of the huge stairway that reaches to heaven, it always bring to mind the great Led Zeppelin song, "Stairway to Heaven." And that reminds me of another joke which says that heaven is reached by a stairway (as Led Zeppelin said), but hell is reached by a highway (as AC/DC said). I listen to classic Australian rock too!

So Jacob, whose life seemed to be on the “Highway to Hell”, now sees, in his dream, a “Stairway to Heaven”.

The hectic coming and going of angels on the stairway seems reflect Jacob’s restless and agitated life. But in the midst all that chaos, the God who appears to him is firm and calm and stable. God reaffirms the blessing and the promise that he had made to Jacob’s ancestors, and promises to be with him in the midst of his difficult circumstances: “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”

Jacob is in a truly desperate situation: he is on the run and he is very afraid. But his dream casts a different light on his circumstances. Whatever he is going through now, beyond this reality lies another reality – the reality of God, who accompanies and sustains him.

Jacob needed the dream to recognize this. No amount of thinking and reflecting would have got him there. Now he can continue on his way with new confidence. He’s still running, but he no longer runs without hope. He travels solo, but he is not alone. He can move on, thanks to the dream and God’s promise. His feelings of fear are no longer the only reality.

The dream came to Jacob at a time of crisis. In earlier times, when he felt in control of his own life and made his own plans, he would not have been so open to God’s message.

In surprise, Jacob recognizes this place as the dwelling place of God, as holy ground, as “the gate of heaven,” and as “the house of God” (which is the meaning of the Hebrew name “Bethel”). The song we sang earlier picked up his words, “You were in this place, but we never knew.”

Jacob’s surprising encounter with God at Bethel challenges us to reflect on where we, as individuals and as congregations, meet God unexpectedly on the journey of life.

As stunning and majestic as Jacob’s dream is, it is also intimate and personal. Whatever we face, we do not have to face it alone. God goes with us. Although we may be lost and confused in a foreign land like many of my Cuban sisters and brothers who have had to emigrate; and although suffering and hopelessness overwhelm us, as it often does in Cuba and perhaps also in Australia, God does not abandon us. The place of desperation becomes holy ground, the house of God, the gateway of heaven.

Our desperate situations are never beyond the reach of God’s care and activity. Even in the midst of death, God is with us, ready to act, to guide, to teach, to liberate, to challenge, and so much more. There is nowhere we can go where God is not already present and at work. All our conflicts can be the holy ground where we meet God, and that encounter will always bring change.

The miracle is not that God appears and bursts into our lives – that happens all the time. The miracle is that we recognize it; that we recognize it within ourselves in the midst of our difficult situations. The stairway to heaven is revealed in the darkest places and situations of our lives, in the difficult and dangerous places, in the situations where we least expected it. As we sang, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and we did not know.”

I come from a country that never tires of asking, “How long? How long?” A country that seems to have lost its way.

The most commonly heard phrase in Cuba today is, “It’s not easy”. It is very like your Australian phrase, “Life wasn’t meant to be easy.” We Cubans say it all the time, over and over again, to remind ourselves that we have a tough road to face every day. We say it to encourage each other in the struggle. It is like we are telling ourselves: “You are not the only one who is going through this.” And, of course, many times we say it to excuse ourselves for not following through on something we have promised. “It’s just not easy.”

Although we may be tired of waiting, we have learned, as Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel, that we must still know how to wait. "Patience achieves everything", as Saint Teresa of Ávila says. Patience reminds us that sometimes things take a while to improve, that the answers are not immediate, and that we need to hang in there. This has enabled us to face the challenges, however hard they may be, with a ray of hope. This is why we can sing, why we can laugh, why we can dream, and why we can make jokes about our problems, even when we are worried sick about how we are going to feed our families tomorrow. "Surely the Lord is in this place, and we never knew."

My sisters and brothers, we may be living in times of despair and anxiety, hopelessness and anguish. We may not see the way ahead clearly, but we are confident that God is there, even where we did not expect to find him. Between the Beersheba and the Haran of our anguish and despair, is the Bethel of our encounter with God, the place where we realize that God is there with us in the midst of our anguish and despair and we did not know it. Sisters and brothers, the stairway of God is, and always has been, within each one of us. No matter what circumstances we face or where we flee to, "the Lord is in this place, and we never knew." Even when the path of our life seems like a "highway to hell", let's not be afraid, because God is present to reveal what is already there – a "stairway to heaven".

Amen.