You will recall Prospero’s speech towards the end of *The Tempest* in which he dissolves his creations and exposes not only the actors but us all: ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded by a sleep.’

Although the context is the art of theatre, it is surely more than a description of the playwright’s skill or the actors’ craft. In Prospero, Shakespeare invites us to recognise the power of speech, for indeed we are all Magicians when it comes to words; it is the very capacity unique and intrinsic to us for imagining and creating worlds. It is the power for truth but also for illusion and deception.

We are natural storytellers, for in the story we are finding and creating or recreating ourselves. The great storehouse of these narratives is surely scripture, both the Old Testament and the New. With many different layers of art, oral as well as written memory, we find ourselves in story. With very little work, the centuries and the cultures, the theological and political agendas dissolve and we discover not just an ancient world, but our world.

Yet scripture is not just a library of the human imagination and insight, it is also a space of experience and of witness. For its overarching theme is one of encounter, encounter with a God who is always present, moving in and through history, in constant relationship with us. The God whose presence fills every page and every genre; whether active, majestic in glory or concealed, whose voice may be heard in the thunder, or calling our name in the soft stillness of the night. God, and God’s faithfulness, is the source that brings each page to life.

The scripture which we have heard this morning places us in this world, its dangers and its paradoxes. It asks us not only what do we find, what thought, or insight, into character and
narrative? It asks us **Who** do we see? For the word of scripture is always an invitation to encounter.

We have the intriguing but disturbing story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. Too easily we can recognise the desperation of the widow seeking justice from a fundamentally closed and self-satisfied system, almost comically desperate to be relieved of her irritating perseverance. Yet she is given to us as an example of the power and value of prayer, a prayer that God must and will answer.

There is no sense in these readings that ‘God’ is a literary device, and invention, to heighten the story or provide a peg on which to hang some spiritual wisdom. Whether it is in the story of Jacob’s difficult and mysterious encounter or in the parable of the determined widow and her refusal to abandon her right to justice, **God is real:** to be wrestled with, to be assaulted even with our demands.

The masters of suspicion that dominate our age would play the role of Prospero for us. They would teach us to liberate ourselves from the artful constructs and fantasies of religion. Now, we are adults; we have no need of such devices and props. Now, we have become the true artists of ourselves and of our world. Feuerbach helped us to see that god is just a projection, and Nietzsche gave us the tools to emancipate ourselves from the weakness of a Christian god by declaring that ‘god is dead’. Today we feel so safe from the ‘god-fantasy’ that, with Julian Barnes we can confess our atheism with gentle arch wit hinting of nostalgia: “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.”

The odd thing about the masters of suspicion is that they rarely suspect themselves. If, for Feuerbach, theology is really only an anthropology, whose anthropology? If god is dead and we are left with the imaginary construct of the Übermensch, is this really liberation? Yes, the Übermensch may prove a hero, but he or she might also be a narcissistic monster. Have we really escaped from story and fantasy or have we simply been given a new collection?
Whether we follow Feuerbach or Nietzsche and their modern contemporaries, the one reality we cannot dissolve or escape is the reality of ourselves and the world we create. Daily, our world speaks its truth to us. Yes, we do experience wonder and gratitude when we see goodness triumph, but we also witness the darkness that hunts in the human heart and puts a question mark over all our claims. The unspeakable violence and corruption, the long slow cry of suffering which carries down through the ages only to join the rising chorus of suffering in our own age.

It really should not surprise us that all these masters of suspicious themselves fall under the spell of their own art. But the word of scripture never minimises or disguises our truth. It is there in all the familiar stories, narratives, laments, parables and poetry. If we attend well to our texts this Sunday, we will see how the word of scripture is not naïve about humanity; about us.

This is why the faith of scripture is no escape to ‘Neverland’. It is the courage to see the world as it is, to gaze into the depths of the human heart without flinching, and there to find something even greater than the mystery of evil: the mystery of a God we could not have invented; who does not turn away in disgust or despair but who comes to us; refuses to let us wrap ourselves in self-constructed fantasies. In the word of scripture, we encounter the God who faithfully leads us on the long journey until we come into the life of truth - “Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem” – to quote Oxford’s newest saint.

When we come to the story of Jacob, it would not be too difficult for a moderately able student of Feuerbach to show that the patriarchal narratives project a god who mirrors the needs and sanctions the dreams of a nomadic people in search of a permanent home. There is no question that this is part of their purpose. Yet in the story of Jacob there is a more complex hermeneutic at work. Jacob’s struggle not only narrates a moment in a founding narrative, it becomes a whole history.

Jacob struggles with God, a God who refuses to be named; refuses precisely to become our object, will not become an idol of use for comfort or sanction. Yet it is in the very struggle that God is most intimately experienced.
We can struggle with a God who appears to block our way but is, in fact, the key to our journey. Who blesses and wounds so that we can never forget, for memory itself – the wound – now also becomes a mode presence. How else can covenant and promise happen except in time and memory; become incarnate in and through a people, through a tradition which is remembered and unremembered, retold and reshaped, in the light of each circumstance, exile, destruction, dispersion, even holocaust – but is never abandoned?

It is an encounter which continues to resonate through history in art and in literature. R. S. Thomas describes it with his characteristic searing spiritual and human honesty in *The Combat*:

```
You have no name
We have wrestled with you all
Day, and now night approaches,
The darkness from which we emerged
Seeking; and anonymous you withdraw,
Leaving us nursing our bruises and dislocations.
```

God has marked and claimed Jacob and given him a new name. In the struggle Jacob is not only resisted, he is held.

The struggle cannot be avoided. It is necessary both for God and us, for God’s own freedom desires us to be free. There can be no genuine relationship unless it is predicated on freedom itself. This is why God refuses to be our idol. As with Abraham and now with Jacob – as all the prophets testify – God does not desire our subjection but our response as a free subject. Such a response is a demand which ultimately surpasses any law or limit of intellect and will. God asks for our whole self, and every aspect of our history, however or wherever we are found. It is nothing less than love – to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, your strength, your soul and mind. The first and great commandment is the discovery of freedom, and as such, it can only be given in freedom. In the struggle, in the darkness, in the refusals, God wrestles us into freedom with the truth that God is, the truth that we are and will become.
God has marked and claimed Jacob and given him a new name, Israel, and it carries a future—of blessing and wound—not just for himself but for his people and the world.

Here, too, in the story, the truth is not forgotten or conveniently erased: Jacob is no hero or Übermensch when he wrestles with God. He is profoundly flawed: cunning and deceptive, ambitious, stealing the inheritance of his brother Esau, and always prepared to sacrifice lives if it is to his advantage. This is a real history, our history, and yet this is the one God has chosen to struggle with; he is the one who will bear the promise: history can be redeemed. There can be no greater declaration of liberation, of hope, and Jacob recognised that only the love of the living God can accomplish this.

In Campion Hall are two charcoal drawings of Jacob wrestling with the Angel by the sculptor, Hugo Powell. They are studies for a sculpture and in which he explores another dimension of this moment. Powell does not draw a battle or a combat, he draws a dynamic dance, one that is almost a lovemaking. For this, too, is the other reality: what can seem like a trial of strength with God becomes an act of love. We are not resisted or defeated, we are held— with all our flaws and twists— held until we can stand straight again and continue the journey.

Jacob is changed and so too is his relationship with God and others. He knows God now in a different way, ‘for he has seen God and lived.’ He cannot turn back; he can only go forward into the future. If the relationship with God has now changed so, too, must his prayer. It can no longer be in formulas and in rituals though they will have their place. His prayer will always carry the memory of holding God and being held by God. He is known, not just through his past but now through his future— the future that only God can give him. He knows also that he is heard. This is the truth to which Jesus is pointing in the Gospel parable: perseverance has its source in knowing God; refusing, even in the silences, to let go.

Perseverance tells us something about ourselves: only the poor and the powerless, only the abandoned and the vulnerable, persevere in prayer for they have nothing else. And their prayer is carried and heard, for it is gathered wherever the eucharist is celebrated. For their prayer is the prayer of Christ and his Church. It is prayer of deep faith, that lives out of Christ’s self-gift; it will endure, persevere, until the end of time itself. It is the prayer which holds even
God to account. It calls upon God to be faithful, not just to us, but to God’s own self: A God who loves; who not only blesses, but a God who carries our wounds.

Whenever we doubt the silence and cannot hear the answer, here in the Eucharist, we come to rest and discover that even in the emptiness there is a presence, an unceasing watchful love.

The Eucharist which we celebrate this morning is the Church’s prayer that rises in faith out of the reality of the Cross. Indeed, it holds the memory of the final combat; here God reveals God’s self, finally breaking free of all the narratives that we impose. The prayer from the cross is no hopeless cry to a dead god. It is God’s cry of perseverance, God’s patient faith in us. The prayer of the Eucharist is the prayer of all the widows, the mothers, constantly keeping before us the memory of the victims of the history we are making.

Here, in this eucharistic prayer, we rightly struggle with our understanding but we cannot hide from the grace of his presence, a presence which gives us the freedom to change; the freedom to begin again a new journey, to gather the poor, the powerless, the lost and forgotten, and with them our wounded planet; the grace to cross over into the new land that God is offering us. The freedom to be true artists and imagine another world, a graced world, a world of blessing and not despair.

This crucified God was the God that Nietzsche despised; he thought he had finally witnessed his death. Yet, in this eucharist is the assurance of the risen Christ who can hold even Nietzsche in his struggle and pain; who redeems him from death itself. It is the gift we can only receive with thanks and humility, knowing that in the reality of bread and wine we come to our own Penuel: for we have seen the face of the living God in Christ, and now we live.