

A grounded God

Gillian Cooper *reflects on* Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob does not deserve to meet God at the place he comes to call Bethel, House of God. He has cheated his brother Esau out of the status and blessing that are the right of the eldest. Now he is running away, afraid to face the consequences of his behaviour. But as he sleeps on the ground, a ladder appears, with angels going up and down. And then there is the voice of God, not, as we might expect, at the top of the ladder, but right down on the ground, next to Jacob. The voice speaks a remarkable message. Despite everything, Jacob will inherit the promise made to his father and grandfather. He will carry forward the destiny of God's people. He is the chosen one, guaranteed God's presence with him always.

God does not always use the deserving. God does not choose the more generous, more deserving Esau. Sometimes God stands beside the least likely people and calls them to be agents of God's purpose in the world. That is good news for all of us.

And by the way, Old Testament angels do not have wings. That is how they can be entertained unawares. And they need a ladder to get from heaven to earth. ☺



Generous God, you are always ready to overlook our weaknesses, and forgive our failings. Help us to believe in your calling, that, undeserving as we are, we may be ready to fulfil in the world the purpose to which you call us. Amen.

Christian writers and thinkers

part II –
Karen Armstrong

by Caroline Hodgson

Born in 1944 in Worcestershire, Karen Armstrong has written two books about her experience of being a religious sister. The first, *Through the Narrow Gate*, describes the time she spent in a convent, while *The Spiral Staircase* describes her subsequent spiritual awakening.

Since leaving religious life she has gone on to lecture and teach,

and has written over twenty books on faith and the major religions, studying what Islam, Judaism and Christianity have in common and how faith has shaped world history. For example, in *A History of God*, she traces the evolution of the three major monotheistic traditions, along with Buddhism and Hinduism, from their beginnings up to the present day. In her introduction she describes the book as a history of "the human idea of God".

Famously, Armstrong has said that: "Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed." ☺

Margaret of Antioch

Margaret of Antioch is commemorated on Monday in the Common Worship lectionary. Julian Smith looks at this remarkable woman.

Margaret of Antioch, Marina in the Eastern Church, was one of the most venerated saints of the Middle Ages. Although her experience was a common one during the centuries of the Church's persecution, it has been much elaborated to encourage the faithful in their trials.

Margaret dedicated her life and virginity to Christ and suffered martyrdom for rejecting the advances of a pagan prefect at Antioch. Legend has it that the devil appeared to Margaret in the guise of a dragon who swallowed her, but then spat her out unharmed. Hence Margaret is the patron of pregnant women and childbirth. She is one of a group of saints known as the Holy Helpers and spoke to and inspired Joan of Arc.

Margaret reminds us that we each have stories to tell of our journeys of faith and that in the sharing of them we can encourage others in their pilgrimage. ☺

“Alone with none but thee, my God, I journey on my way.
What need I fear when thou art near, O king of night and day?”

St Columba (AD 521-597), Irish abbot and missionary evangelist to Scotland