

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Second Sunday after Epiphany Yr B 18 January 2015

1 Samuel 3.1-10 Psalm 139.1-5, 12-18 1 Corinthians 6.12-20 John 1.43-51

As many of you know, both Fr John Stewart and I welcomed new grandchildren recently. No doubt, like me, John has been looking in the face to this new little person and wondering who they are and who they will become. I have been doing it via photos alas, as my new grandson lives in London. We ask ourselves when we hold a new born, who is the little person, who will they grow up to be, what will they choose for a purpose and work in life, where will they live, who will become their friends, even perhaps will they live into old age?

Well, the season of Christmas and Epiphany is a bit like that process of looking into a baby's face and asking ourselves who is this and what will become of them? Week by week in Epiphany we are given glimpses of the story of Jesus unfolding as we are shown who it is we welcomed at Christmas.

We celebrated Jesus' birth; then we saw the symbolic gifts of the wise men and wondered why such strange things for a baby – gold, incense and myrrh. Gifts pointing to divinity and mortality.

Then last week the adult Jesus was suddenly our focus. We heard of Jesus' baptism and John the Baptizer's words that 'he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit'.

Now this week, Jesus is calling others to form a community with him; to be his disciples, his friends, as he will call them. Today we hear of Philip, and Nathaniel who responds but only after doubting that Jesus could possibly be worth his attention –given, you understand his origins as someone from Nazareth.

Nathaniel gave Jesus no creditability at first. Jesus was a small town hick; he didn't come from anywhere worth much. Nathaniel's dismissal must strike us as ironic for as readers of John's gospel, we already know from the prologue to the whole story that this is the Word made flesh. This is the one who origins are with God: in the beginning as the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.... and the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us.... (John 1) On a human level Jesus comes from the Galilee; on a divine level he comes from an eternal life with God.

Philip doesn't argue with this friend. He just says, 'Come and see'. Well 'seeing' is what this season of Epiphany is all about.

Jesus ignores the cynical comment about his home town too, and instead honours Nathaniel with the title Israelite and says of him there is not guile, no cunning trickster as there was in Jacob whose story Jesus is about to allude to.

The story of tricky Jacob was known the way you and I know the story of the jolly swagman or Ned Kelly. It was a story about the dealings between God and Jacob, one of the early

patriarchs in Israel. By the end of the story Jacob's name has been changed to Israel. Those stories were as real as family stories are to us. They were told and retold.

So when Jesus talked about angels ascending and descending, Nathaniel would have immediately remembered an event in the Jacob story. It goes like this: Jacob was on the run. He had tricked his blind and aging father into giving him the blessing that belonged to his older brother Esau, the hairy one. The trick had been discovered. So, Jacob goes off to his uncle's family, a long way away.

His uncle is going to trick Jacob eventually when it comes to which daughter he marries but that is another story. On the way to his uncle's Jacob goes to sleep one night, and has a vision of a ramp, sometimes translated a ladder, set up from earth to heaven. Angels are ascending and descending.

In the vision God assures tricky old Jacob that God will not abandon him. God was giving Jacob God's dream for his future instead of Jacob's own scheming dreams. Jacob called the place of his vision Bethel – the house of God. Bethel became the second most important place of worship in Israel. Only Jerusalem is referred more often in the scriptures. Jacob said of that place 'surely this is none other than the house of God, and the gate of heaven.' (Gen 28.17)

So when Nathaniel heard Jesus say that if he keeps company with Jesus he will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man, Nathaniel would have taken notice. Jesus was claiming to offer the reality to which Jacob's vision pointed. Jesus is saying: I am that ladder, that place of two way traffic between heaven and earth; I am God's house on two legs. And John's text is clear the offer is to us all since the language is 'you' in the plural.

Those disciples make it look easy in the stories don't they? We could imagine it was all plain sailing for them; imagine that they saw plainly who Jesus was right from the start. I don't think so! Jesus' disciples were sometimes inept, sometimes doubted, often questioned, got angry and got it wrong. They tried to resist what God asked at times, they counselled Jesus to be more cautious, they tried to contradict him when he could see he was in for trouble with the authorities and that more trouble would happen in Jerusalem; they overpromised what they would do to support and protect him and under delivered and in the end, one of them betrayed him to his enemies.

But they also had moments of pure gold when they really trusted God to be at work in Jesus and in them. They kept his story alive and handed it on, they did as he asked when he had gone from their sight and broke bread and baptised; they wrote down his story, his gems of wisdom sayings and his challenging parables and here we are today receiving this living tradition over 2000 years later. This is the way of a disciple.

The scriptures don't present us with the stories of people we can never be like. The scriptures invite us into the stories of people just like us. Those people had choices to make

just as we do, and an understanding to develop of the baby whose birth they welcomed, just as we do.

Last week Fr John said that in plunging under the waters Jesus enacted God's presence with us no matter what threatens to overwhelm us in life. Now, we hear Jesus speaking about God's presence with us even when we have been tricky and difficult like Jacob.

God's call is always to go beyond what we know now and grow in our trust in God. Stick with me Jesus is saying and you will see 'greater things' than you ever imagined. And the next time Nathaniel is mentioned by name he is one the sea shore in that backwater Galilee (he must have overcome his prejudices) greeting the risen Christ, that baby now completely the divine/human person, the ladder between heaven and earth, Jesus was born to become.

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