

Sermon for Sunday 24 September 2023 – Michael and All Angels

Pete Postle, Reader

Genesis 28.10-17; Psalm 103.19-22; Revelation 12.7-12; John 1.47-51

May all I say and think be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. I was able to get these steps today because my wife has shortened my cassock by three inches. Would you like to sit?

Well, a strange little gospel reading there - there's an awful lot in it, so I'm going to dissect it. It brings us to the stage in Jesus's ministry, when he begins to invite his first disciples to join him. In the verses that precede today's lesson, Andrew, who had already been a disciple of John the Baptist and his brother Simon have decided to follow him. Now at that first meeting, Jesus gives Simon his nickname, Cephas, in the Aramaic or Petros, Peter, in the Greek; the rock, the dependable one. Andrew brought Simon to Jesus with the words, we have found the Messiah.

So that John's gospel is taking a very different view from the other three. The realisation that Jesus is the Messiah only slowly dawns on his disciples in the other gospels. You will remember that in those accounts it is Simon Peter who finally makes that giant step in what is usually termed his confession of faith. John, however, indicates that the disciples are at the very least prepared to countenance the idea right from the outset. And it would certainly help to explain why ordinary working fishermen alike are prepared to drop their means of earning a living to follow Jesus. The third disciple to be recruited, writes John, is Philip, summoned by the simple call, 'Follow me'. Which again underlines the astounding personal magnetism possessed by Jesus, matched of course by the astonishingly simple acquiescent faith of Philip. Philip, in turn, fetches Nathaniel, which is where the intriguing bit starts. The passage that you heard is full of references to scripture that only a devout Jew would be able to identify.

But first, who is Nathaniel? He is mentioned once more by John, towards the end of his Gospel, fishing with some of the other disciples, but he is never mentioned by the other three gospel writers. Needless to say, biblical scholars have had a field day trying to identify him. From those, I think, my favourite suggestion that he is the same person as Bartholomew, on the grounds that, conversely, Bartholomew is never mentioned in John's Gospel. And Bar-Tholomew, sort of like Bar-Abbas, is really a second name, the son of Ptolemy. So he could have been, I suppose, Nathaniel Bartholomew of Bethesda, just as similarly Jesus would have been Jesus Bar-Joseph of Nazareth.

Now, when Philip finds Nathaniel, we have that peculiar detail that he is sitting under a fig tree. Now this is actually symbolic, a metaphor. A typical Old Testament reference you'll find, say, is in Micah chapter four, 'But they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees.' The reference is to faithful Israelites sitting at peace under their own trees, studying the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, the books of Moses, in order to find enlightenment and thus dispel any doubts they might have over their belief in God. So Jesus has identified Nathaniel as having been such, deep in reflections, when he first saw him; a man, that is to say, with a receptive mind, eager to find and receive the truth, a true Israelite.

Philip has announced Nathaniel, that Jesus from Nazareth is he of whom Moses and the prophets wrote - the promised Messiah. And Nathaniel is quite rightly observing that there is no prophecy in Scripture to suggest that Nazareth of all places, is where the Messiah will come from. Nevertheless, Nathaniel's curiosity allows him to go along with Philip's invitation, only to be greeted by Jesus with that, another odd statement, 'Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.' In Aramaic, the actual statement would have been an idiom, 'Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob.' So you start seeing the readings are tying together.

Jacob's deceit, of course, you may not remember, except if, like me, you were brought up on 'Beyond the Fringe'; but Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, 'Behold, my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man.' Jacob, you might now recall, deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing, the inheritance, what is due really to his elder twin brother, Esau. It is Jacob that is chosen by God to be the father of his chosen people. After Jacob, which means, by the way, 'he takes by the heel' or 'he supplants', has symbolically wrestled all night with the angel of God. God renames him Israel, which means 'the one who strives with God'. And thence the whole history of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Renaming people seems to be one of God's little foibles; here in John's Gospel, we have Jesus renaming Simon. Rather ironically, one guesses, because Peter the Rock does get things famously wrong from time to time. And there is also Abram, meaning something like 'exalted ancestor', who God renames Abraham, meaning 'ancestor of a multitude'. In each of these three instances, one thing is absolutely clear - there is a new relationship between that person and God. In short, each of these three will repent, that is to say, turn away from their old ways and follow the will of God. So in the context of today's narrative, Jesus is identifying Nathaniel as Israel, 'man of God', with no hint of Jacob, 'man of guile', in his makeup. Nathaniel is astounded and delighted that Jesus has so accurately read his thoughts. He exclaims, rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel. Well, that's an intriguing glimpse into the Hebrew psyche, isn't it?

That leap from 'Son of God' to 'King of Israel'. But that's precisely what was expected of the coming Messiah. God was sent his son to lead his people back to their former glory, the latter day King David, in fact. Jesus is going to have some work ahead of him to dissuade his disciples of that expectation. But for the moment, Jesus, in his reply, employs further memories of Jacob. So, very truly, it says when you there, which means 'Amen. Amen', literally, I tell you, begins Jesus, and uses the story of Jacob and his ladder at Bethel; all the angels descending to Earth and ascending to Heaven; but no ladder this time. And the angels of the Lord God are ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

Now, there's that most enigmatic of titles; it should really be translated as something like 'the human being'. It can mean just me, or it can mean something infinitely more. In the first meaning, Jesus often uses it of himself to strengthen humanity and his role as servant to humankind. In the second, deeper, meaning, as here, he is referring to, or could be referring to, the Book of Daniel, which I'll read as a fitting end to this very surprising passage of scripture; 'I saw one like the Son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven; and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him. To him was given

dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away; and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.' Amen.