

Homily for 20th March 2022 Evensong, Year C, Lent 3

Preached at St Michael Smarden

Genesis 28:10-19a; John 1:35-end

Homily

At first glance it is not obvious why these two passages from Genesis and John's gospel are drawn together for today's readings. The only link between them appears to be that they both mention angels ascending and descending from heaven.

Jacob sees them in a dream, as if going up and down a ladder between heaven and earth, and he interprets this as indicating that the place is particularly holy and close to God. He calls the location Bethel, which means 'house of God'. This is why you see so many chapels and places of worship named 'Bethel'. Anywhere we experience the closeness of God could be called by this name.

Centuries later, Jesus tells Nathanael and those with him that they will see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. In other words, he's telling them that their minds are going to be blown, and what they thought was mundane – "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" – is going to be revealed as the glory of God.

But there's more going on here.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus says of Nathanael, "Here is truly an Israelite in which there is no deceit!" It seems an unusual thing to say to a man who has just mocked your hometown and seems inclined to dismiss your credibility before you've even opened your mouth.

Theologians believe Jesus is deliberately contrasting Nathanael with Jacob, who though he became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel was known as an

inveterate man of deceit. Remember how he lied to steal his father's blessing from his brother Esau? Jesus is therefore identifying Nathanael as a new Jacob, a new type of Israelite, just as Jesus is a new Adam, come to heal and transcend the failings of the old.

Nathanael will see the glory of God face to face just like Jacob, and will be transformed by that experience, just as Jacob was. He will become a prototype of a new humanity reborn through an encounter with Jesus Christ.

This passage from John's gospel may seem like a simple story of disciples being called by Jesus to follow him, but what we are witnessing is the boundary between heaven and earth becoming translucent, so that the glory of God begins to break through and be seen on the earth. Jesus is not only a messenger from God, but the means through which human beings can have an authentic encounter with the divine.

Jesus is the point of contact between the finite and the infinite, the conjunction of time and eternity. Jesus is the place where the heavens are opened, and divine glory can be contemplated. And how does this experience begin? Simply by Nathanael's friend Philip telling him, "Come and see!"