

**Sermon for 29<sup>th</sup> September 2019 – Gen 28:10-17; John 1:47-51; Rev 12:7-12**

*“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*

Typical Jesus! Give Him a compliment and he throws you a puzzle! Why didn't Jesus just say to Nathaniel “You think remote viewing is impressive? Wait ‘til you see how I become the route that reconciles humanity to God, the gateway to heaven. Because that is what he is getting at. Here He is, starting His ministry, but already looking forward to its fulfilment: His crucifixion and resurrection and what they would achieve.

Why did He refer Nathaniel to Jacob's dream of a huge mudbrick staircase between earth and heaven? A stairway into God's presence with His messengers moving between earth and heaven on it, between where we are and where God is.

Part of the answer probably lies in differences between the ways people thought and spoke in Jesus time and how we do now. Exaggeration, irony and vivid metaphors were common then. People were much more sophisticated in recognising symbolism than we are. Parables were a common teaching tool. All of these made for emotionally powerful and memorable communication, important in a society where literacy was limited and even the raw materials for writing were expensive so that you had to remember stuff. A society in which I would have been totally lost given my lack of memory!

But I suspect that something else may have been going on as well:

This is very near the beginning of Jesus ministry. He had received the Holy Spirit at John's baptism. He had been tested by Satan in the wilderness and passed with flying colours. He is now starting to recruit his disciples, the embryo Church, the people who were to become his spiritual “sons”, living out and spreading the gospel to the world and so blessing all the families of the earth ... in much the same way that Jacob's sons had been the embryo Israel, tasked with showing the Nations what God is like and how to live in harmony with Him ... and, like us, not always making a particularly brilliant job of it.

I suspect that in mulling over his vocation and, given He was fully human as well as fully God, having some doubts and questions, he was recalling Jacob, a very slippery character, who God transformed and renamed Israel (Gen 35:10) and who became the Father of the Nation of Israel.

Why do I think this? Because of Jesus's strange comment as Nathanael approached Him, “Behold a true Israelite in whom there is no guile”.

Jacob (or Israel) was guile personified. The behaviour of his offspring left much to be desired, but Nathanael, by contrast, was a descendant of his who was very much “What you see is what you get” and Jesus approved!

... and this may give us some clue to how Jesus used scripture and how we might use it.

Often there are events in our lives that in some way parallel or recall some piece of scripture. Musing and mulling over these texts can sometimes give the texts a new relevance, not least at the emotional level, and help crystallise our feelings, inform us and help us move forwards.

When I have listened to someone who has had a truly rough deal out of life and, in distress, is slagging off God for what He has let happen to them, the urge to try and defend God has sometimes been enormous. But when I remember Job's friends who fell into just that same trap and how they misrepresented God and made Job's suffering worse I come to my senses... and I have learnt to keep my mouth shut! Scripture helps us as much by its examples of how not to behave as by its examples of good behaviour.

The puzzling, stirring, sometimes scary imagery of dreams and visions can change how we see the world. Our passage from Revelation (Rev 12:7-12) is a reminder that behind the disturbing and horrific history of this world is another reality. It does this in the vivid and emotionally powerful imagery of the most biting political cartoon, so that it registers and sticks in our minds.

It reminds us that, in this reality, angels have played and continue to play a big part. We are reminded that not all angels are on the side of God and good. There is a war on, a war that has already been won through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

It reminds us of the greatest and most perfect gift in the history of the universe and that we, the Church, spiritual descendants of Nathaniel and the other apostles, are called upon to tell the consequences of it and live out those consequences in our own lives.

It gives us a perspective on events. Don't expect things to be plain sailing, but don't give up either, the hard work has already been done. It gave the early Church that same perspective when it was being persecuted. It is a vision to contemplate and mull over. A vision we can allow to transform our perspective of the world.

Yes, bad things will happen, but it won't go on forever. God is in control and knows what He is doing.

In the meantime we can do what Philip did with Nathaniel, when he introduced him to Jesus. We can share our experiences of Jesus with others.

*Paul Smith September 2019*