

2019-03-24 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price

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

There is, for once, an obvious link between our lessons this evening, and I want to look at both of them in a Biblical sermon.

In the first lesson (**Genesis 28, 10-19b**) we heard of Jacob, son of Isaac, and grandson of Abraham, the three patriarchs who lived perhaps 1500 years before the time of Jesus. Isaac did not want his son to marry a local, pagan, Canaanite woman in Beersheba but to go to his brother-in-law's home at Haran and find a wife. No dating apps then. On his journey Jacob reached a place called Luz and decided to spend the night there. He laid his head upon a stone and went to sleep. He had a dream – the Bible is full of dreams – about a ladder set up on earth with its top reaching to heaven. There's a delightful piece of sculpture on both sides of the west front of Bath Abbey in Somerset, with a ladder on each side and angels going up and down on it. But apparently the Hebrew word translated 'ladder' doesn't mean what we usually consider a ladder – a stepladder with rungs. The Hebrew suggests a very long staircase, with a temple at the top.

The stairs which Jacob saw in his dream united earth and heaven, with the messengers of God ascending and descending on them. The messengers or angels go throughout the world carrying the orders of God and watching over his people. And then, at top of the ladder, God appeared and gave Jacob words of encouragement and hope. He repeated the promise which he had given to Abraham and Isaac that all the land would belong to him and to his very numerous descendants. He promised to be with Jacob wherever he went and he would bring Jacob back to this land. Then Jacob awoke from his dream and he was afraid, afraid with godly fear. Instead of rejoicing that God had promised to be with him, he was terrified: **'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'**.

Then Jacob took the stone on which he had slept, set it up for a pillar, and poured oil on it. He then named the place Bethel, that is the house of God. And that name Bethel has come down through the centuries for God's house. Many chapels are called Bethel, and indeed in North Wales a whole village is called Bethel, after its chapel. I was for a time Vicar of Kidwelly in Carmarthenshire and in the wonderful priory church there, there was a door with the inscription in Latin **'Haec est Domus Dei, Porta Coeli'**, that is **'This is the House of God, the Gate of Heaven'**. The church was seen as the awesome dwelling of God. There is a lesson for us to be reverent in God's house, aware of the holiness of God, but also rejoicing that, unlike Jacob, we have been taught to address this same God as 'our Father'.

On to the second lesson (**John 1, 35-end**). These verses in the first chapter of St John's Gospel give us St John's account of the calling of the first four followers of Jesus. John the Baptist was standing with two of his followers when Jesus passed by, and John exclaimed **'Behold the Lamb of God'**. The two disciples followed Jesus and he invited them to come to his lodging where they stayed talking to him until the end of the day. One of the two was called Andrew, and he went to bring his brother Peter to hear Jesus, with the astonishing claim that they had found the Messiah. We are used in Church to call Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour, but what an astonishing thing for Andrew to say all those years ago in Bethany. And of course the fact that Andrew went to fetch his brother to meet Jesus is often used by preachers to urge people to bring others today to Church to find Jesus.

It was then that Jesus gave Simon the nickname 'the rock', Cephas in Aramaic, Peter in Greek. Jesus knew that Peter would be the leader of the early Church after Jesus' return to the Father. **PTO**

Then it was the next day and Jesus decided to go to Galilee in the north. But first he found Philip, who came from Bethsaida, which was also the home town of Andrew and Peter. Jesus used the typical words of a rabbi or teacher seeking a disciple when he said to Philip **'Follow me'**. It seems that Philip agreed immediately to follow Jesus. Then Philip called Nathanael to come to Jesus. There's a pattern here. Andrew called Peter. Philip called Nathanael. It's possible, in fact highly likely, that Nathanael's other name was Bartholomew.

In this very heightened atmosphere – what charisma Jesus must have had - Philip told Nathanael that he and the others had found the expected leader of Israel, predicted by Moses and the Old Testament prophets. Here he was, Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael was dismissive, for which I think we can forgive him: **'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'** Nathanael came from Cana in Galilee, which was about ten miles north of Nazareth. If we put that into our local geographical terms, there's someone from Whitchurch asking if anything good can come out of Wem! Nazareth was for Nathanael a small and unimportant town. Would God really plan for his Messiah to come from such an insignificant place? In the words of a paraphrase, Philip told Nathanael: **'We've found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It's Jesus, Joseph's son, the one from Nazareth'**. Nathanael said: **'Nazareth? You've got to be kidding'**. **'Well'**, said Philip to Nathanael: **'come and see'**. So off they went to Jesus.

Then the chapter ends with a curious dialogue between Jesus and Nathanael. I quote a paraphrase: **'When Jesus saw Nathanael coming he said, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body"**. Nathanael said, **"Where did you get that idea? You don't know me"**. Jesus answered, **"One day, long before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree"**. And then there was Nathanael's astonishing declaration that Jesus, the rabbi from little Nazareth, was the Son of God, the King of Israel. What a thing to say of a wandering teacher, whom he had only just met! Jesus said that Nathanael had become a believer in him simply because Jesus had said that he saw him one day under the fig tree. But he hadn't seen anything yet, said Jesus, and he added **'Before this is over you're going to see heaven opened and God's angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again'**. So we are back to Jacob's dream.

Some time ago I preached a sermon here in which I confessed that I wasn't sure about whether angels existed. After that service quite a few people told me quite forcibly that they had no doubts about the existence of angels. Fair enough. I once read that more people believe in angels than believe in God. Perhaps some confuse angels with fairies. The Greek word for angel means a messenger, and if we forget the winged figures in stained glass windows we can accept that there are creatures of a separate creation from human beings who are intermediaries between God and us. After all in the creed we confess that we believe that God is the maker of all things, *visible and invisible*.

But of course the true ladder between God and human beings is Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, as he called himself, who became one of us at Bethlehem to take us by the hand and lead us to God. We accept what in human terms is the audacious claim, the claim made by Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, that God became a human being and lived on earth in the person of Jesus, and we have access through him to God. In words set for the introduction of the Peace in the Church in Wales, words which I use whenever I celebrate Holy Communion: **'Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need'**. What a wonderful promise, what a wonderful Saviour, what a wonderful God.

Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, and blessed be God in his Angels and in his Saints.