

## Ladder

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Merciful God,  
you have prepared for those who love you  
such good things as pass our understanding:  
pour into our hearts such love towards you  
that we, loving you in all things and above all things,  
may obtain your promises,  
which exceed all we can desire.

Our text this morning may be found in Genesis, chapter 28 and verse 12:

Jacob 'dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.'

'University Challenge'. Imagine you are the team from the University of Dinard. Your starter for ten. What is the first name, the name given to him at his circumcision, of Jesus' disciple, Bartholomew, the Apostle to the Armenians, to whom the Anglican church in Dinard is dedicated ? And the answer is, as you rightly said, Nathaniel. And your bonus question. What did Jesus promise Nathaniel when Philip brought him to Jesus, recognising that this young man was truly a good-hearted Jew ? And the answer is a vision of 'the angels of God, ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Nathaniel was a good Jew, a righteous Jew, a Jew who expected to witness the coming of God's Messiah. And when his friend, Philip, rushed up to tell Nathaniel that he had seen the Messiah and that he was Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth, Nathaniel unkindly poured cold water on his friend's enthusiasm by repeating the well known doubt that nothing good could ever come from Nazareth. Understandable, given Nathaniel was well posh and came from Cana in Galilee. But Jesus knows precisely who and what Nathaniel is and tells him that he is **'truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit'** (John 1 v47) and that before Philip came to get him, Nathaniel had been sitting under the shade of a fig tree.

The effect on Nathaniel is electrifying. Intuitively, Nathaniel knows that Jesus knows him, that Jesus is the real thing, the one he has been waiting for and he blurts out his new found faith in Jesus: **"Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel."** And Jesus promises him that one day Nathaniel will see **'heaven opened and the angels of God, ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'**

If Nathaniel was the righteous Jew that Jesus recognised him to be, then Nathaniel would know what he was being promised had once been seen by Jacob, fleeing from the anger of his brother Esau to safety with his uncle Laban where he would marry Laban's two daughter's, Leah and Rachel. At nightfall, Jacob needed to stop and find a place to sleep. Not that comfortable, given he took a stone as pillow on which to rest his head as he slept. And, as he slept, Jacob dreamed; he dreamt of a ladder reaching up to heaven, up and down which ascended and descended the angels of the Lord. How wonderful ! How extraordinary ! Jacob

woke up and felt he was in a special place – Bethel, the house of God. And then the God–encounter. The Lord spoke to Jacob, renewing his father, Isaac’s blessing to him which he had obtained through deceit, that Jacob would indeed be the father of a great people through whom the world would be blessed. Awesome or what ?

So Nathaniel would know that he was being promised a God–encounter on the scale that Jacob had seen in a dream. Nathaniel would see the connection between heaven and earth and the coming and going of angels to and from God’s Messiah, the Son of Man, Jesus the Christ.

And one small clarification. The word in Hebrew that the NRSV translates as ladder – ‘sullam’ from salal to heap up – is more likely to mean a staircase, a long ramp that was typical of the enormous temples to be found in Babylon around this time, a way up and down, connecting earth and heaven.

So what has Jesus promised Nathaniel ? Let me here quote William Barclay whose commentaries I find so helpful: ‘It may be that Jesus smiled. He quoted the old story of Jacob at Bethel who had seen the golden ladder leading up to heaven. It was as if Jesus said: “Nathaniel, I can do far more than read your heart. I can be for you and for all men the way, the ladder that leads to heaven.” It is through Jesus and Jesus alone that the souls of men can mount the ladder which leads to heaven.’

May what has been promised our patron saint, what was true for Jacob, also be true for you and me – the possibility of really truly being God-connected.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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G: Sermons 36 : Ladder

