

WHERE DID YOU COME TO KNOW ME?

BATH ABBEY

If you've been to the city of Bath,
you may recall that the west end of Bath Abbey
has a unique façade -
either side of the great west doors,
two enormous ladders
are inscribed into the stone from top to bottom
with angels climbing up and down them.

Obviously, it depicts the first reading this morning from Genesis
and the story known as Jacob's dream.

But that's not all it shows -
Look again and high up, right at the top,
sits Christ enthroned in glory
surrounded by angels.

Here we also have the vision described in today's Gospel -
heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son
of Man.

MESSENGERS NOT THE MESSAGE

Too often, we consider angels as something incidental and decorative to our
faith, but their constant presence in scripture should make us think again.
It's true, they're not the focus of the Good News – they are the messengers not
the message – but their role is still essential.

And as worshippers at a church dedicated to the Holy Angels,
they play a special part in our lives.

As we celebrate our patronal festival today,
in the midst of a pandemic,
the ministry of the angels as protectors and guides is especially relevant.

As the Michaelmas Collect eloquently puts it:

*'grant that as your holy angels always serve you in heaven,
so, at your command, they may help and defend us here on earth'*

This ministry of protection from harm is a common theme in the Christian understanding of the angelic host, but most vividly described in relation to Saint Michael, who in the book of Revelation is shown as one who fights with us and for us against evil.

In our struggle against corona virus the language of war and fighting is commonly used, and whether we think that's the right kind of language or not, it certainly feels like a battle at least some of the time – but Revelation reminds us we are not alone in the contest against the things that assail us.

GOD KNOWS OUR HEARTS

But let me turn to today's Gospel and repeat the question at its centre.

The questions Nathanael asks Jesus:

'Where did you come to know me?'

Christ knows Nathanael – he has an insight into his nature and character – when he says *'Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit'*.

It is an example of how Christ knows the fears and longings within each one of us.

In this Gospel we find Christ described as both 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man' It is because the Christ who lived among us is both these things at once that God knows us on the inside.

No wonder then that the most important word in this passage is the verb 'to see' -

It appears five times in quick succession.

Christ sees Nathanael from afar under the fig tree and when he comes near, and predicts what he will see in the future.

Here, *seeing* and *knowing* are intimately connected.

Christ sees and knows Nathanael, because he looks into the depths of the human heart.

In this same way God looks at each of us -
he sees us when we are far off,
and when we are near.
Before we even respond to him,
and when we are drawing closer;
and all the time,
he looks within us
seeing us
and knowing us,
And always loving us.

CHRIST THE LADDER

But to fully understand the meaning and message of this encounter between Christ and Nathanael,
we have to connect it with
with the story of Jacob in Genesis
on which it is clearly modelled.

Jacob – in response to his vision – identifies a *place* as holy:
'Surely!' He cries, 'this is none other than the House of God and the gate of heaven!'

but Nathanael identifies not a *House* of God but the *Son* of God.
So we are to understand that the focus of God's presence and activity moves
from a place to a person.

But there is one more comparison that is even more revealing –
In Jacob's story the angels ascend and descend via a ladder.
But in the Gospel, there is no ladder,
or rather there is –
the ladder is Christ himself.
He is the means of ascent and descent to heaven
He is the route by which our prayers ascend on high
and grace and mercy descend upon us.

VISION OF HOPE

My friends,

there is a general sense of foreboding in the air.

Many of us are weary of current restrictions,
and fearful of what might come in the near future.

Christians are just as much prone to these depressing feelings of uncertainty
and anxiety, as anyone else,

but let us also remember that we have Christ and the angels on our side
and a vision of glory to fill us with hope.

In the coming weeks and months,

if restrictions increase and continue for a long time,
there will be much that we can do to respond to need as it arises.

– to such things as unemployment and financial insecurity,

to declining mental health and increasing isolation,

to hunger both physical and spiritual.

A parish church like ours, embedded in the community is the way God continues
to see, know and respond with love to the desires of all our hearts and the
needs of the people.

As Nathanael drew closer to Christ,

so let us also draw closer to the Lord at this time,

that we may glimpse that same vision of hope and joy.

Let us hold it before us,

and open our eyes to the sight of Christ,

surrounded by his angels,

who are always ministering to us,

to help lift our prayers to heaven

and bring down a blessing on earth.

Saint Michael – pray for us

Saint Gabriel – pray for us

Saint Raphael – pray for us

All the Holy Angels of God – pray for us.

Amen.