

## **17<sup>th</sup> January 2021 6 pm Evening Prayer: Jesus Knows Nathanael**

Led by Val Whiteman, Talk by Val Whiteman, Readings by Geoff Whiteman & John Wild, Intercessions by Gill Palmer

*This transcript is only of the readings and the talk.*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Revelation 5:1-10 – The Scroll and the Lamb [NIV 1984]**

**1** Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. **2** And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ **3** But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. **4** I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. **5** Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’

**6** Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. **7** He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. **8** And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. **9** And they sang a new song:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

**10** You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth.’

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: John 1:43-51 [NIV 2011]**

**43** The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

**44** Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. **45** Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’

**46** ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked.

‘Come and see,’ said Philip.

**47** When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, ‘Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.’

**48** ‘How do you know me?’ Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, ‘I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you.’

**49** Then Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.’

**50** Jesus said, ‘You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree. You will see greater things than that.’ **51** He then added, ‘Very truly I tell you, you will see “heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on” the Son of Man.’

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

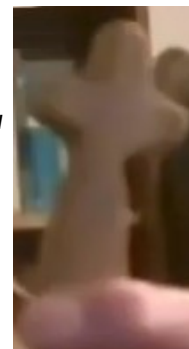
## Talk

[Val Whiteman:]

We're thinking about commitment to Christ, from this reading in John. I don't remember ever having to preach on it before, so it's been an interesting experience doing the research. And it would be really helpful if you looked up the story of Jacob in Genesis after this.

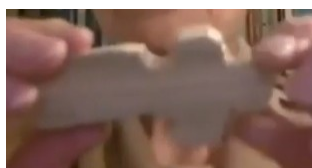
In lockdown we've all found interesting things to do and for me, it's been a bit unusual. My father worked in wood all his life and he was very skilled, so I've always loved wood. Well, since lockdown, Geoff and I have been making holding crosses. I don't know if you can see them, or it, from wood which we cut from our garden. And I know, not everybody finds this thing fascinating, but I do.

So, here's the trunk, which is cut from one of the cherry trees that was ill, that we had to take out of our garden.



And Geoffrey kindly shaped it for me, so that it is a blank which looks like this. I cut it out.

And this is a really rough one that I've just started. So you can see I've just been doing the hacksawing on it. And it takes me ages to get it to the point where I linseed oiled it, and it's all smooth and beautiful and I can give it away.



The end result is very pleasing, at least to me, it gives me pleasure to shape and hold something. So, can you hold on to that sort of shaping thought for a while, while we go back to the reading.

The reading I'm looking for is the one in John which is Nathanael, the call of Nathanael. The Nathanael in this reading means 'given by God', like the more familiar 'Theodore', the Greek variant of it. And he's probably, if you are wondering why you haven't heard of him anywhere else, he's probably the Bartholomew of the other gospels, and 'Bartholomew' means, as you probably know, 'son of Tholomeus', and so that is sort of the equivalent of a surname. That's just in case you were worried that there was an extra disciple that John knew about, that the other gospel writers didn't, or *vice versa*.

So this is a rather odd story about the call of a man who came from Cana in Galilee, and had a very low opinion of anyone who came from Nazareth. You remember that Philip his friend asked how the crowd is to be fed at the feeding of the 5,000, and he's there then. And when the Greeks come to see Jesus in Jerusalem, in John 12, and Philip and Andrew bring them to see Him. Philip has a Greek name like Andrew (Nathanael doesn't).

When Philip, who calls Nathanael, speaks to Nathanael, you can sense his excitement. This Greek-speaking Andrew's brother, who comes from Bethsaida, the house of fish, Philip comes to Nathanael, obviously a friend, and he speaks to him about Jesus, and he is so excited! The structure of the sentence that he writes is, in the original, something like, "The Messiah! The one Moses and the prophets wrote about, we found Him!" And 'Nazareth' comes at the end, Jesus from

Nazareth. When Nathanael jokes about Nazareth and Philip uses the same words for the inquiry that Jesus did to the disciples, "Come and see!"

And then there's the part I've always found a bit strange: when he comes to Jesus, Jesus describes Nathanael as "an Israelite, in whom there is no guile or deceit." The word he uses there interestingly is the same word that's used for fishing hook, somebody that you hook in by guile or deceit. But if you look at the end of the reading, verse 51, you may get a clue as to why Jesus says this, because Jesus is talking about Jacob. I don't know whether, when Nathanael was under the fig tree, he was contemplating Jacob's life. If he were, it would make sense. But you remember, and this is where the Genesis passage comes in, that Jacob, the trickster, tricked his brother out of his birthright, his brother Esau. And more than that, with the help of his mother, he also tricked him out of his blessing from Isaac, normally reserved for the firstborn. And Esau was of course the older twin. If you want to look at that, that's in Genesis 25 & 27.

So, when Jacob is growing up, and for a lot of Genesis, the Genesis story, he is not a very pleasant person: he tricks his way through life. As a patriarch, you know, you feel he's got a fairly long way to go before he meets anything like God's standards. You remember, he goes and finds a wife, with his kinsmen Laban, who in turn tricks him. When he's coming home again, he is frightened of Esau, with good reason. And so when he's travelling home with all his flocks that he's got with Laban and all his wives and all these children, he waits, and he talks to God and he's, perhaps for the first time in his life, a frightened man coming home, he really wrestles with God in prayer, he spends the night, Genesis talks about him wrestling with an angel in Genesis 32. So, when the angel has finished wrestling with him, slightly later, God appears during a dream that Jacob has, which we'll talk about in a minute, and his name is changed. You remember that Jacob is one of the patriarchs from whom the nation of Israel descended. He's the one who had the 12 sons from whom the 12 tribes are named. He really seems to have found walking in God's way very challenging. As I say, he's full of guile.

So when Jesus tells Nathanael that he has no guile, he's paying him a huge compliment. Unlike the patriarch and unlike many of his contemporaries and indeed Israelites through history, Nathanael is genuine. He wants to obey God's law, and walk God's way.

You can see Nathanael's astonishment, that Jesus should have known him in this way and known that he was meditating under a fig tree. And something as slight as that convinces him that Jesus is who Philip said He was: "the Messiah, the Son of God and the King of Israel." Jesus' answer to him after that takes us to the crux of this passage.

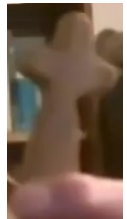
How does Nathanael believe? On the evidence before him, he accepts who Jesus is, he accepts the testimony of Philip. But Jesus says at that moment, Nathanael actually doesn't understand what it means for Jesus to be Son of God and King of Israel: they're just words. Nathanael is wonderfully moved by the fact that he seems to have found the Messiah, but there's no depth to his knowledge. Following Jesus will deepen his understanding of who Jesus is and what He's come to do.

So at the end of the passage in verse 51, Jesus goes back to the Jacob story. Still on the way home, after the wrestling, Jacob sleeps. And he sees visions of angels ascending and descending on a ladder from Heaven to Earth. It's one of the most famous pictures from the Old Testament, you probably remember Jacob's ladder. There are various interpretations of this, a lot of them from Jewish theology, but one is that the vision occurred on the same mountain on which later the Temple at Jerusalem was built. So it represented the Old Covenant, where the link between Heaven and Earth, the ladder, was the sacrificial system. In the passage in John, and this is a sort of mind-blowing bit, Jesus says that

He will become the link between Heaven and Earth, the New Covenant, the ladder which enables us to come into God's presence. God promised that Jacob would be blessed, that the whole world would be blessed, because of Jacob and his descendants. He didn't live to see it. What Jesus is saying is, Nathanael has. And at the time of the call of Nathanael, Nathanael didn't understand what it meant. His idea of Jesus was relatively superficial. You'll remember that even at the time of the crucifixion, the disciples struggled to understand why Jesus had to die. And they only came to realise the impact of His death after the resurrection of Jesus, His appearances and further teaching to them.

So this is a really interesting story about a man long ago, who was called by a friend, Philip, you might call him the first evangelist, called to a Jesus that he said was the Messiah. And yet what Jesus says right at that moment is, "You actually don't know. Let me take you deeper." And for us, I think, the story of our journey with Jesus will be the same. You note in the second reading where John in Revelation shows the risen Jesus, the Lamb, in triumph, in Heaven, part of Godhead, as he says earlier in the Revelation, the beginning and the end. Where we are on our journey will depend on our experience of who Jesus is, for us. We may see Him as a miracle worker, who we call on when we're desperate, like now. We may see Him as a friend, as a brother, as uniquely able to save us. But until we recognise the transcendent glory of the Son of God, we have a lot further to go.

Remember the holding cross I showed you at the beginning, it takes me hours to shape it. In the Bible we are likened to the potter's clay, and God shapes us, just as I shape the cross and smooth it, so God shapes us. Of course, the analogy doesn't go all that far because we are involved in the process and we let God shape us if we're obedient, but we aren't the finished product on day one.



Do you remember in C.S. Lewis, when people have reached Heaven, they say, "Further up and higher in." Knowing Jesus, travelling with Him, as we do, is inexhaustible. If you are getting bored with the Christian life, I suggest you go back and talk to Jesus about it. If it all feels a bit like a chore, then talk to Him, dare to ask Him for a deeper knowledge of Himself. Jesus describes knowing Himself, knowing Jesus, to Nathanael, as a long experience, a lifetime of knowing. So wherever we are on the Christian path, let's think about "Further up and higher in", and use this time when we can't meet together as we used to do, to think what we know of Jesus, and dare, dangerously I think, to ask Him for more of Himself.

Amen.

Father God, You gave Your Son for us, to make a bridge between us and Heaven. We thank You that we can still know and follow Jesus. And we pray now that You will give us grace to know Him better, until one day, we can see Him as He is.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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