

JESUS REVEALED TO NATHANAEEL

(Genesis 28.10-22 and John 1.43-51)

Introduction

We have been thinking at the beginning of this year about the ways Jesus is revealed to people.

There was a man approaching middle age who felt empty inside, and longed for something more. So he joined a monastery to have a revelation of Jesus. The chief monk told him that it would be very difficult. He would have to give up all earthly possessions, pray all day and only be allowed to say two words very five years.

Five years go by and the Pope comes to visit. "How's it going?" he says and the man replies "Bed hard." So the Pope says, "Terribly sorry, we didn't know. We'll take care of that." Five years later the Pope comes back again. "How are you my son, is everything OK now?" The man replies, "Food cold." So the Pope says, "Right, we'll sort it out for you." Five more years pass and the Pope comes back a third time. "Is everything OK now?" The man says "I quit." So the Pope says, "Well, I'm not surprised. You've been here 15 years and all you've done is complain!"

Everyone here, at some point in their life, has had some kind of revelation of Jesus – at a moment in time, you became conscious of this figure from history unlike any other and hopefully you have become aware at a deeper level that he is still alive today and that it is possible to encounter him personally and know him.

That happened for me first of all when I was very small. My parents had me baptized as a baby, I was taken regularly to Catholic Mass when I was small and I then went to a primary school run by nuns. I learned stories from the gospels about Jesus – Jesus was revealed to me.

But when I was 17, he was revealed to me at a whole deeper level – the level of the heart. It changed my life. It was like a Damascus Road conversion;

before, Jesus was simply a historical figure who said wise things and did amazing tricks (as I understood it).

But after my deeper revelation of him I knew life would never be the same again. I discovered that he is alive today, at work in the world, mending shattered lives, healing broken hearts, and restoring fractured relationships.

Small, Low, Simple

The Gospel passage we just had read tells us how the church got going. It started *small*; it was just four people who decided they would follow Jesus. But now there are millions of us on every nation of every continent. Only God knows how many of us there are. One day, Christians of all generations, past and present will join together in a great multitude that no one can number.

Not only did it start small - it started *low*. Our Gospel reading is situated at the very lowest point on the earth's surface, the lower Jordan valley – it's the only place on earth where you can get a pilot's licence for learning to fly a plane *below* sea level. The church started low but one day it will finish in the highest heaven, seated in the heavenly realms in Christ.

It also started *simple*. There was no elaborate marketing campaign, no organised mission, no gathering of crowds – it was just one person telling another who then tells another.

Archbishop William Temple once wrote a book on his knees as he read through John's Gospel day by day. He published it as "Readings in St John's Gospel" and when you open the book you find the Bible text on one side of the page and Temple's thoughts on the other.

Often the thoughts are quite long and deep but next to v45 which says "Philip found Nathanael and told him we have found the one Moses wrote about" Temple wrote down one simple thought; "The greatest service one man can render to another."

The greatest service you can render to any other is to introduce them to Jesus. This is something we will be learning a lot more about this year.

Jesus, Nathanael and Jacob

Well, it's a rather puzzling passage. Philip introduces Nathanael to Jesus and there is a conversation between them that doesn't quite make sense.

Jesus sees Nathanael approaching and says "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Nathanael's reply shows that he's a bit sceptical. "How do *you* know me?" he says. "What makes *you* say I'm an Israelite in whom there is no deceit? We've never even met before now."

That's fair enough. If a stranger walked up to you and said "I like you, you're really honest and authentic" you'd think "What do *they* want?" wouldn't you?

So Jesus replies, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree, before Philip called you."

So Jesus *has* seen Nathanael before. But they are not acquainted as such. And yet that answer is all Nathanael needs to go from indifferent sceptic to full-on follower. He's convinced! "Rabbi" he says, "You are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

That's real a puzzle isn't it?

The shade offered by a fig tree was used in Bible times for meditation and prayer. If you said that someone was sitting under a fig tree, people would understand that they were engaged in personal devotions. And it seems that Nathanael was thinking and praying about Jacob, the figure from our first reading.

Jacob, grandson of Abraham, father of the twelve tribes of Israel, was a scheming, conniving, double-dealing, devious, treacherous, wily, deceitful cheat of a man. The National Association of Used Car Dealers would expel him from membership for conduct unbecoming of the profession!

Honestly, he conned his brother out of his birth right. He deceived his father. He tricked his father in law out of a fortune. Several times in his life he had to escape as a fugitive from the wrath of those he had double-crossed.

I think Nathanael was deep in thought, puzzling over this man Jacob while he sat under his fig tree. How could a rogue such as Jacob ever receive God's blessing? How could God choose such a dishonest, fraudulent, deceitful man as patriarch of the nation of Israel? Why didn't he choose someone more morally respectable?

Of course, we know it's grace. The truth is that God chooses us not because we are good, but because he is good. But good people, morally upright people are usually the ones who find that most difficult to accept.

Jesus knows *exactly* what Nathanael is thinking about when he is sitting under the fig tree. So when Jesus says to Nathanael "Here's a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit; I *saw you* – under the fig tree, remember?" Nathanael realises that Jesus knows his every thought. He also knows that Nathanael, unlike Jacob, has an honest heart. It's a revelation. That's why Nathanael bursts out with his response "You are the Son of God, the king of Israel."

And the last verse clinches it. Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

He's talking about the dream in our first reading – Jacob's ladder with angels going up and down on it. He's saying I'm the fulfilment of it all. I am the ladder between heaven and earth, the way by which sinners can reach heaven. It all points to me. Can you see it?

Seeing Salvation

I hope you can, because this section of John's Gospel is all about *seeing*.

It starts before our reading when John the Baptist *sees* Jesus coming towards him and says "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Then Jesus is baptized and John says "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven like a dove and remain on him."

A couple of verses later two men ask Jesus where he is staying and Jesus replies "Come and see." So they do.

(That's such an important verse. People often complain about the Church, sometimes with justification. But we need to tell people "Look at Christ and tell me what you find wrong with him.")

Then into our passage, when Andrew, Peter and Philip say to Nathanael that they've found someone pretty special, Nathanael asks Philip "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" And they too reply "Come and see."

When Jesus and Nathanael meet Jesus says "I saw you while you were under the fig tree."

And finally, when Nathanael has confessed Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus says "You will see greater things than that."

Ending

You see, people need to see Jesus.

The humanist H. G. Wells was once asked: "What single individual has left the most permanent impression on the world?" Wells immediately said "Jesus of Nazareth. [I] cannot portray the progress of humanity honestly without giving him foremost place" he said.

But not only do people need to see Jesus, he also sees us. There's nowhere you can go where Jesus does not see you and know you. He sees everything you do and say, he knows you through and through – and he still loves you.

He sees you – and he wants you to see more of him.