

Genesis 28:10-17

Psalm 139

John 1:43-51

God: At which end of the ladder?

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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The greatest question which confronted the disciples of Jesus, and the first Christians was this: Who is this Jesus? The arguments – for they split the Church – were frequently around whether he was a man, a fully human being – or God. If both, then How? All four Gospels are peppered with the debate but not least John's and this opening chapter. The initial phase of the discussion came to an interim conclusion in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century at the Councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon and Constantinople, all of which are foundational documents of the Uniting Church (!).

I'd love to say more, but instead I will concentrate on today's reading from John – however, we must not forget that we are only a handful of verses away from that magnificent opening which can be summarised in v. 14 as '*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... and we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth*'. The second part of the chapter is thus a bit of a disappointment.

Jesus comes to Galilee - on his own initiative. He meets Philip and says, 'Follow me'. In the next sentence, we listen, with some surprise, as Philip says to Nathanael, '*We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.*' Now that is quite a rapid learning curve. So far, John has told us that the titles of Rabbi and Messiah (1: 36,38) have been used by John the Baptist and the disciples Peter and John, but not that one, nor 'Son of God' or 'King of Israel' which Nathanael is about to supply.

But Philip wasn't there – he was not even a disciple until this moment. He seems to think that being 'the son of Joseph of Nazareth' is important, and Nathanael treats that with a scornful 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' So this is a *constructed* tale to draw us all into that long-debated question. I don't mean that John is trying to trick us – he is as much without guile as Nathanael! And this is where Jesus gives a really intriguing answer, and it's what I want to explore. 'Guile' in the KJV is translated 'deceit' in NRSV, 'an Israelite without guile', so Jesus is rather nicely inviting us to share Nathanael's doubt. And John underlines it in that, only in his Gospel, and 26 times there, is Jesus recorded as saying 'Amen, Amen', *twice*; 'Truly, truly'. It indicates that what follows is of great importance.

*'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'* (Jn 1:51)

Which takes the alert bible student to the ancient patriarch perhaps *most* characterised by guile and deceit, Jacob:

Jacob had just cheated his blind old father to give him the birthright which belonged to his slightly old twin (Esau, the hairy man), and fled from his brother's rage under the excuse provided by their mother, that he should find a wife. Now he is out in the wilderness, a long way from anywhere, and exhausted by more than travel. He lays down to sleep with his head on a stone. (In Egypt, I actually saw a camel driver doing just that.) Unsurprisingly, it produced a dream.

He saw (Gen. 28:2) a ladder ‘*set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven*’ and there was a lot of angelic traffic on it. A wonderful image. The Coptic ikon on our front cover looks more like a (down?) escalator. The next verse has Jacob turn and see ‘*the LORD*’ (the sacred name, not just any god) standing beside him, at its foot. Jacob had thought he was at a distance from home far enough *not* to meet his God. And not only was God *there*, feet on the earth, but God then promised him all this land that he’d slept on it be his own, for ‘the families of the earth’ for flourish in. Then he woke up.

And he memorably declared, ‘*Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!*’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*’

This was a ‘mountain-bottom’ experience and somewhat against normal religious expectations. Was not God on the top of Mount Horeb/Sinai? But Moses had first met God far away at a burning bush. Did not Elijah seek God on the same mountain, and did he see God in earthquake and fire? And the apostles wanted to build tabernacles for Elijah and Moses on Mount Tabor to keep Jesus with them? And Jesus sent them down to the plain.

Well, Jacob built a cairn of stones and called it a house of God, a *Beth-el*.

And within a few kilometres there were other such sacred cairns, and shrines. There was one at Dan, another at Shiloh (where Samuel was), until Moses put the broken stones of the Ten Commandments in a box - and God dwelt there under a tent for a long time, until it came to Jerusalem. Then Solomon built the granddaddy of all Temples there.

I sometimes wonder why it is that we don’t remember God’s reaction to Solomon’s ornate designs for the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple’s grand dedication: ‘*Who asked you to build me a House?*’ said God. That Temple, or what remains of it, is a building still fraught with significance in our time. The most likely site for Bethel is now in the occupied West Bank, 5 km from Ramallah. (We wish our Foreign Minister, our fellow Uniting Church member, Penny Wong a fruitful outcome of her visit there this week.)

Is it any wonder that the Scripture is full of *warnings* about sacred places? I know several, and visit them, but they *are* such places because they have been where generations of the faithful have knelt where, as the poet T. S. Eliot wrote, ‘prayer has been valid.’

Is God at the top or the bottom of the ladder? The biblical view is: Yes and No. All ground is not holy. God is at both ends of the ladder and at neither.

Three quotations to illuminate my point:

From my former Anglican colleague Andrew McGowan:

‘...[in John] the true Israelite, without guile, bears true witness to the king of Israel here. And in time, like Jacob, he will see the “house of God and gate of heaven” (Gen 28:17), but understand these are not a place, but a person.’

That is the basic meaning of the one title Jesus seems to accept: ‘Son of Man’.

Former Presbyterian and Church of South India bishop, Leslie Newbiggin [*The Light Has Come*, 22-3]:

*Jesus* is ‘the place of God’s dwelling, the place where God is no longer hidden behind the vault of heaven, but where there is actual revelation, actual traffic between the [human] world and the world of God.’

And Lutheran liturgical scholar, Gordon Lathrop [*Holy Ground*, 47] has:

‘In him is the gate of heaven, the awesome place, the holy presence beside the poor and the wretched. What humanity has hoped for in shrines and temples is found in an utterly new way in him.’

And, I promise you, in this place, in this service of Word and Sacrament, Jesus, Child of God and child of Mary (as the Chalcedon Council said), meets us, today.

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