**MICHAEL and ALL ANGELS – 29.08.2018 - John 1.45-51 Ascension.**

Nathanael was born in Cana and Philip in Bethsaida, the equivalent of toffy Toorak, when compared with a tiny town called Nazareth. Nat delighted in being a member of the Chosen race; in the lottery of life, he felt that he had come out tops. But, he was pessimistic about Israel’s welfare. His beloved Holy Land had been subjected to repeated foreign invasion, conquest and exile. The victories of Jewish revolutionaries, 150 years before, which had thrown out the godless Greeks, were shortly after followed by the conquest by an even worse Roman tyranny, which enchained and crucified the nation once more.

The whited sepulchral religious leaders had grown completely counterfeit, and their worship had become merely a hollow sham. The minds of the unscrupulous priests were fully focussed on cut-throat business deals, to rake off what they could from pious peasant pilgrims, who were ignorant of Temple coin exchange rates. At the same time, the priests were flogging off to butchers out the Temple back door the supposed sacrificial animals which were then recycled and resold over and over to the next holy sucker.

Nathanael longed for God to send the long-promised redeemer, who would lead his beloved land into a new era of religious justice, love and peace. Philip boasted that he “had found the One of whom Moses, in the Law and also the prophets wrote, the Promised One. This was Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.” At this news, Nathanael, incapable of deceit or falsehood, and, honest in his frankness, was startled. Nazareth was nowheresville, a fly spot on the wrong side of the tracks for a Messiah’s birthplace. And he blurted “Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Lift up your eyes and ears and determine whether or not I’m right about this teacher.” Nat’s opinion was no sceptic sneer. He merely pointed out that there was nothing in the Holy Scriptures to connect the little known Galilean village of Nazareth with a Messiah, the long-sought redeemer-king of Israel.

But, this is how God works. God chooses to come to us through the lowly and the despised, through the people of the little towns up the hill, just like Nazareth. And when Jesus comes to us, we know that we are truly in the house of God.

Philip dismissed Nat’s apparent put down, saying, “Shelve your derision. Don’t take my word for it. Just come and see for yourself,” and he led him to Jesus.

Jesus had earlier seen Nathanael seated in his prayer closet under his fig tree, the place where rabbis met to study the Torah. At once, Jesus read his troubled mind as he prayed for the glory days of Israel to return. Jesus mentally praised the man for not letting his own prejudice stand in the way of his coming to the Lord, and went on “Here is truly an Israelite, in whom there is no deceit, nor guile.” At once, the bible bashers would have picked up the word picture that Jesus used.

He was referring to the bible story of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. What was this story?

The twin boys, Esau and Jacob, the sons of Isaac and Rachel, had fought a civil war inside mummy’s tummy, to the degree that she sought help and was told that there were two nations at war within her. When born second to Esau, Jacob emerged firmly gripping Esau’s heel. All his early life, Jacob schemed how to wrest back the birthright, the leadership of Israel, from his airhead brother. His chance came when Esau was out hunting. Jacob bullied his blind and confused aged father into conferring the leadership on him in a once-given, never-to-be-repeated blessing. In his darkness, and relying only on smell and feel, Father Isaac, mistook Jacob for his preferred choice.

Now, Jacob was in dire trouble, so, to seek refuge from his brother’s murderous intent, he fled into the wilderness to a place he later called Bethel “the house of God.” In this strange land, lonely and homeless, Jacob sensed that even the God of his fathers had abandoned him. What happened?

May I make a detour before returning to Nathanael? I wish to weave a few lines from the hymn “Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee,” into my words. The less religious Australian Diggers in WW1 sang it as “Nero, my dog has fleas, Nero has fleas.” The hymn tells us that “E’en though it be a cross that raiseth me,” the cross of troubles and trials in life that Jacob now faced, even though life may be a daily lot of suffering, grief and trial, far from separating us *from* God, these will be the steps on a ladder, a stairway to paradise, to lift us up to God.

Where did the hymn-writer Sarah Adams gain this view? In Genesis 28, sleeping rough, in flight from his avenging brother, with a stone as his pillow, Jacob dreamed a remarkable dream of a stairway reaching up to heaven. On it God’s angels ascended carrying to God Jacob’s tormenting question “I stole the birthright to lead Israel from my inadequate brother, but, have I done well?” And, angels descended, with God’s answer, “You are a dirty rotten pretender. What you have done is knavish trickery, to deceive your poor, blind father and to cheat your brother. But, yes, what you did was what I desired you to do, so that Israel may be in good hands, and one day become the proud nation of godly promise with me as its God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which it may not under Esau’s leading. One day, you will return to take up the guiding of Israel, the land I once gave to Abraham and Sarah, and there, you will make it a land flowing with milk and honey. Then, long after your time, one day, my Son will come to help your descendants to set up a perpetual traffic between heaven and earth, a constant communication of prayerful requests coming up and my mercies and benedictions coming down, just as you have experienced today. Over and out for the present. God. ”

Hymn verse 2 speaks of Jacob: “Though like a wanderer, the sun gone down. Darkness be over me, my rest a stone.” It was worth Jacob having a stone pillow on which to sleep rough, if it could bring such visions of God’s mercy.

Verse 4: “Then, with my waking thoughts, bright with thy praise, out of my stony griefs, (Jacob’s pillow), Bethel I’ll raise. So by my woes to be, nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee.” Mistakenly, Jacob had thought, that, far from home, he was also far from God. The angels descending taught him that, wander where he might, God was never far away. God would pitch God’s tent, God’s tabernacle, in the midst of the Chosen People. Thus, Jacob cried “This is none other than the gate of heaven.” From Jacob’s dream, we learn that faith will triumph over all troubles, and, when things are at their worst, we will know the nearness of our God. Verse 5: at life’s end as Father Robert now knows: “If on a joyful wing, cleaving the sky, sun, moon and stars forgot, upwards I fly. Still all my song shall be, nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee.”

Back to Nathanael. His encounter with Jesus was mind altering. It transformed him from a sceptic to a believer. Jesus’ foreknowledge and piercing ability to know Nat convinced him that Jesus was far more than the son of a village carpenter. Fully won over and utterly impressed, he addressed Jesus as Rabbi, Son of God and King of Israel. Now, he was certain that this man had to be the Promised One, the Chosen One who represented God on earth and who will rule over God’s Chosen People. In turn, Jesus promised him a re-run of Jacob’s dream. “You will see greater things than these. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Jesus will be the link between heaven and earth [John 3.13]. He went up to God on the stairway cross, having completed the work so assigned him that, filled with shock and awe a pagan centurion at the foot of the cross gasped “Truly, this was the Son of God.”

Ever since Jesus trod the gospel dust, Philip’s appeal to Nathanael has been the way. One person says to another, “I follow Jesus, why don’t you?” The appeal has always been a one-to-one, person-to-person call, which became 1000s by 1000s. And so it is for us, today. We know with absolute certitude that God’s angels will come and go with every wish of ours, and we will feel God’s presence close beside us. Our task is to say “Come and see for yourself what Jesus can do for you.”