

2 Epiphany – Year B – January 21, 2009 - Homily
1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51
Susan E. Wilmot

The Victoria Bridge between the island of Montreal and the so-called South Shore mainland is actually a railroad bridge, with metal grating access “roads” on either side of the rail line. During the regular rush hour, the bridge’s four car-widths of traffic lanes become all one way into Montreal in the morning, and all one way out of Montreal in the evening. During the interim period traffic is two way. The bridge is very narrow and Montreal drivers are not known for being careful or considerate. I tried as much as possible to avoid the bridge, but if I had to drive it I usually rode across white-knuckled, holding my breathe most of the way. The tires of our car just seemed to float across the metal grating with no real traction. It felt like driving across black ice. I hated being a passenger, and I was terrified to drive the bridge, because it really did not feel like I had no control of the car. What has always been amazing to me was how few accidents occurred on that bridge.

Well, it seems in our Gospel reading that there is no accident in the way Jesus begins his ministry and gathers His first followers. Jesus decides to go to Galilee, finds Philip and says, “Follow me.” Philip, who probably knows Andrew and Peter from his home town of Bethsaida, in turn finds Nathanael and tells him that they have found the Messiah. Philip seems to be a bit of a name-dropper – he uses Moses, the Law and the prophets as his rationale in trying to persuade Nathanael to join them. As if to confirm that Jesus is no ordinary man, he apparently sees right through Nathanael, and exclaims the truth of his personality as a man in whom there is no deceit. Nathanael confirms that Jesus speaks truly, but is puzzled as to how he knows that about him. Jesus’ next words are not easy for us to understand except by speculation and what was likely a common thing of His day. The fig tree in the yard basically stood for a peaceful life, hearth and home, and Sabbath rest. The tree provided food, and offered shelter from the blazing heat of the sun. It would have been a place to sit and pray or read Scripture, and we can deduce from what Jesus says that Nathanael was a man of prayer. Furthermore, it seems highly likely, given Nathanael’s response to Jesus, that he had a profound spiritual experience at some time under his fig tree in the privacy of his own home. In other words, you and I can look at this way; Jesus’ supernatural knowledge of Nathanael should be no surprise. An open heart to God is an open heart to Jesus. He knew that the heart of this man already belonged to God, and that he was open to knowing even more about God and God’s ways through Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Our English language does not do Jesus’ next words justice. Jesus stops speaking to Nathanael personally, but addresses the whole group when he says, you – plural – and so meaning all of you, “will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” We cannot help but think of Jacob and the dream of the ladder from heaven when we hear about angels ascending and descending. In fact, the connection is already in the text for us because the words used to describe Nathanael as one in whom there is no deceit were also known to mean one in whom there is no Jacob. Jacob is quite notorious for being a trickster and deceiver before being renamed by God as Israel, and empowered to lead God’s people the Israelites. The word translated as “deceit” also means guile, and had by then become quite the colloquialism for describing the ancestral forefather Jacob!

In Jacob’s dream, the angels are ascending and descending to earth on the ladder. The top of the ladder reaches into heaven. Jacob’s dream and Jesus’ words both let us know that God’s messengers have always been with us, keeping a kind of communications link between heaven and earth -- before, until and after -- the coming of Jesus. We have just celebrated the events of Advent and Christmas where angels abound in the readings, with the annunciation of Jesus’ birth and John the Baptist’s, and the sharing of the Good News with the shepherds. Angels continue to be sent by God to

help us, to comfort us, to save us from danger, and to share special messages from God. Angels bring God's words to us, but only Jesus is *the* Word of God.

In the Gospel accounts, when Jesus is quoted and prefaces something with the words "very truly, I tell you" he is about to share something very profound about God and Himself. In this case, Jesus' words tell us that the heavens are opened to all, and we will see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Jesus is the Son of Man. That is how He describes Himself most often in the Gospels, and only one other person calls Jesus by this title – the martyr Stephen. However, several people in John's Gospel ask who He means by that name, which tells us that it wasn't a common messianic title in Jesus' day. By its usage, the designation is nonetheless telling us a lot about Jesus' understanding of His role as Savior and redeemer of the world, and Himself as the bridge between God and God's creation. The angels are God's messengers, but Jesus is the true and only bridge between heaven and earth.

Finally, it is Philip's invitation to Nathanael that I would like to leave us with tonight. "Come and see." Those simple words are the bridge by which you and I can also reach out to others, so that all the world may know the truth of God and heaven through Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, our Savior. This is Jesus, the bridge of God's victorious triumph of life over death, where there is no reason to fear, and in whom all hope and everlasting life resides. Come and see. Bring a friend.

Amen.