

knowing
a sermon preached on the feast of
Saint Michael & All Angels
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at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Daniel 7:9-10,13-14; Psalm 138; Revelation 12:7-12a; John 1:45-51

Before he saw Nathaniel under the fig tree, Jesus *knew* him.¹ I wonder what John the evangelist means in saying that Jesus *knew* Nathaniel? Some interpret this to mean that Jesus could see around corners – that he knew in advance everything that was to happen, not only to him, but indeed for the whole of history. That is how many people have interpreted Christ as the ‘Son of God’.

The church struggled with this issue very early on – it’s one of the key factors underlying the conciliar disputes that led to the creedal definitions of Christ. The hard-fought conclusion was that a Jesus who could see around corners – who knew everything in advance – would not be a fully human person. He would instead be an extra-terrestrial visitor, a God in the disguise of being human, but not *truly* human, not experiencing full humanity. Hence the investment in the creedal declaration which continues to perplex not only Christians, but especially Muslims, that Christ is both fully Divine, *and* fully human.

We may be tempted to say, as many do, that this doesn’t much matter. Indeed, some say that our dialogue with other faiths, and especially Islam – to whom Christians appear to be polytheists – would be greatly improved if we just dropped this. Now I am not qualified to weigh into the finer points of philosophical theology on this. But what I do know is this: it does make all the difference at a very basic, pastoral, practical level. For what possible use is it to us to attempt to follow a Jesus who was not in fact fully human, who did not experience full humanity as we do? How could we possibly emulate him – truly be his disciples – if he is not actually one of us? This seems to have been the intuition of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews: what use is a ‘saviour’ who has not truly suffered as we suffer?²

So back to Nathaniel, the fig tree, and the claim that Jesus knew him independently of the five senses. Does this ‘knowing’ suggest that Jesus was in fact a spaceman after all? No, Christian doctrine insists that the Jesus who ‘knew’ Nathaniel was not a spaceman, not a crystal ball gazer who could see around corners.

The Greek New Testament uses two very different words translated into English as ‘to know’: *oida oida* means the kind of knowing which is derived from the five senses, things that can be ‘scientifically’ measured; but *ginōskō ginōskō* is not dependent on the five senses. In the case of Jesus’ knowing Nathaniel when he was under the fig tree it’s the latter.

But what kind of ‘knowing’ is this? Many scientists (and perhaps many more reductive rationalist-materialists, scientists or not) claim that only that which can be detected with the five senses has any reality. It is with this somewhat grandiose confidence that some scientists claim that religion – and all spiritual knowledge and experience – is nothing but fantasy. However, Albert Einstein – and for that matter, a great many eminent scientists – report knowing things otherwise. Einstein’s description of his intuitive scientific breakthroughs is remarkably close to this kind of knowing.

In fact, many people will privately admit that they have come ‘to know’ things they cannot explain. Some, like Einstein, claim this kind of knowing for some of the greatest ‘discoveries’. Some even report that their lives have been saved because of such knowing.

Now institutional religion has always been rather suspicious of this kind of knowing. There are good reasons for this. Sometimes there have been people who have claimed

¹ John 1:48

² Hebrews 3:14-18

knowledge which has been either deluded or dangerous, or both. But I suspect that, eccentrics aside, the real issue is power and control. Individuals knowing things which the institutional religious machine does not know – or cannot accept – is fundamentally threatening to the religious institution's hold on power.

In fact, it is precisely this that fuels the religious reaction to Jesus, who claimed to know 'the Father'.³ And indeed there were some who therefore accused him of being demon-possessed.⁴

At the end of his long and astonishingly fruitful life Carl Jung was asked the question: 'Do you believe in God?' Jung's famous answer infuriates some religionists and some scientists alike: 'I don't need to believe; I know'.

How did Jung 'know', with such unshakeable confidence? How did Einstein come to know his extraordinary scientific breakthroughs? How did Jesus 'know' Nathaniel before his five senses were able to measure anything? How did Jesus 'know' the Father?

Well, Nathaniel is impressed. Jesus tells him that if he reckons this was impressive, just wait 'til he sees "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Human One"! Angels? The Hebrew root word is מַלְאָכַי *Malak*, meaning 'messenger'. The Greek Old Testament (known as the Septuagint, 'LXX') translates as *aggelos* *angelos*. The word 'angel' (in both singular and plural forms) is used 455 times in the Scriptures, 272 of those instances in the New Testament. It is simply not possible, therefore, to take the Scriptures seriously and ignore angels.

Angel, 'messenger', means that which mediates between two realities, like the conduit between the heaven and earth; between Spirit and matter; between the Divine and the human. So though institutional religion has always been wary of the kind of 'knowing' of Jesus and Einstein and Jung – and countless Christian and other mystics down the ages – even so the church has always accepted the weight of the Biblical witness on this point.

By the means of angels 'ascending and descending' we come to know of things which the five senses are simply incapable. There are even occasions when that knowing is of Michael nature: defending us, so to speak, against that which might otherwise harm us.⁵ More commonly, there are countless occasions when angelic messengers reveal the Divine presence: taking such forms as creative breakthroughs; new insights; world-transforming inspirational religious, political, economic and social potentials.

Reality is always more than that which can be measured by the five senses: there is always more. In our time we can hardly ignore the findings of astronomers and cosmologists, who tell us that only about five per cent of the cosmos is visible. Angels, Daniel's 'night visions'⁶, dreams, are the spiritual intuition's symbols of that potential for connection – for synthesis, for union of the opposites, for creative unification of all that we are only able to see as divided.

We Christians say that this union we long for is most clearly and most emphatically seen in Jesus the Christ. And our tradition has always declared that this reconciling, creative-union potential is the innate capacity of *all* persons. At the Altar-Table of Christ we participate in, and give ourselves to, precisely this transformative action.

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³ John 10:15, 17:25

⁴ John 10:20; Matthew 12:24

⁵ Daniel 7:7

⁶ Daniel 7:13