

Faith Without Guile.

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St. John i. 51.—And He saith unto him, Verily, verily I say unto you, hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

“A LITTLE thing is a little thing, but a little faith is a very great thing.” St. Gregory’s saying would seem to apply very appropriately to Nathanael, whom we know better by the name of St. Bartholomew, whose festival we are celebrating to-day. His little faith was rewarded with the promise of greater things to come, and the promise was extended to those with whom Nathanael had just cast in his lot, for, though our Lord addressed Nathanael in particular, He included with him the others who were standing by. His words, too, are of special moment for they are introduced by the twice repeated verily; and words of our Lord which were prefaced in that way are of unusual solemnity. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” We may notice by the way how our Lord puts first angels ascending from earth to heaven before they descend from heaven to earth upon the Son of Man. The same order is observed in the Vision of Jacob which suggested the language of the episode recorded by St. John. It is a reminder to us of the unseen ministration of angels upon earth, which must have been from the beginning of things. There can never have been lacking those mediating beings to keep open the communications between earth and heaven: but it is suggested that their services are still needed, even though the Perfect Mediator has come, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. They are associated with Him in His mediatorial work.

That Nathanael should come to recognise this was one of the greater things promised to him as the reward of his faith. Nathanael believed at first on the word of another.

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Later he saw for himself. Nathanael was one of the first to believe in Jesus Christ. The story of his being brought to Him is one of the most interesting stories in the Bible and well illustrates our Lord’s methods of dealing with those who came in contact with Him.

He values men as they are and finds some point of connection with them.

What is the point of connection between our Lord and Nathanael? Why did our Lord conclude His talk with him with those words, reminiscent of Jacob’s vision at Bethel, of the ladder set up on earth and the top of it reaching to heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending upon it?

Jesus had just called Philip to be His disciple. “He findeth Philip” in the words of the gospel, and it may perhaps be inferred that He deliberately sought for Philip. In the same way Philip findeth Nathanael.

The words of Philip on finding Nathanael indicate that he was a student of Holy Scripture. “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law, and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.” No doubt Nathanael was meditating on the Messiah of whom the Scriptures spoke and wondering when Messiah would come and what sort of Person He would be. St. John the Baptist had spoken of One who should come after Him. He had even pointed

out Jesus to two of His disciples as “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.” He alluded evidently to the Paschal Lamb, as St. Paul also identified Christ with it. “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast: not with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

St. John the Baptist further pointed to Jesus as the One who should come after him; whom he had recognised only because he saw the spirit descending upon Him and abiding upon Him. But Nathanael’s difficulty was that Jesus was of Nazareth. He asked Philip hesitatingly, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

The same difficulty occurred later when Nicodemus offered a defence of Jesus, that He should at least be heard. He was met by the taunt, “Art thou also of Galilee?

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Search and see for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.” The Gospel of St. John records the progress of faith and the progress of unfaith. We see the difference between Nathanael and the rulers at Jerusalem. Nathanael maintained an open mind. He was willing to receive further light and knowledge before making up his mind either to accept or reject Jesus. That is characteristic of faith. It is receptive. That is why a little faith is a very great thing. There is no limit to its power of expansion.

The disciples of our Lord were often very dull of understanding and slow of heart to believe. They sorely tried their Master’s patience, but they were receptive; in spite of their shortcomings they were open to receive further knowledge.

On the other hand the rulers of Jerusalem were prejudiced, i.e., they had already prejudged our Lord and decided against Him. They were determined not to give Him a hearing. Jesus of Nazareth did not square with their theory of the Messiah, and they refused to listen to any suggestion or accept any new fact, which might make it necessary for them to modify their theory. We are so easily blinded by our prejudices and disguise them with the name of our convictions. And argument will not change them.

Philip would not argue with Nathanael when he said, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth.” All he said was, “Come and see.” Nathanael came, saw and was conquered. His response to Philip’s urging showed that he was transparently sincere in his search for the truth. So his first reward was the approval of Jesus Christ expressed of him, not to him, overheard rather than heard by him.

“Behold an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile.” Our Lord’s words must in some way have chimed in with Nathanael’s thoughts. He saith unto Him, “Whence knowest thou me?” Jesus answered and said unto him: “Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee.” This was enough to convince Nathanael. He made his confession of faith: “Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.” And observe how the story of Nathanael’s faith fits in with the purpose of St. John’s Gospel. “These are written that ye may believe

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that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye may have life through His Name.”

As Nathanael believed, and others after him who saw Jesus Christ in the flesh, so in ages to come those who have not seen may yet come to believe, and live.

Life implies capacity for action, and faith is the mainspring of action. Faith in Jesus Christ enables us to share in His life. The vision of God is the life of men and in Jesus Christ we see

God. There is a note of exultation in the words of St. John in his first epistle, "The life was manifested and we have seen it and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us." The life of Jesus Christ was towards the Father, and they who share in the life of Christ are towards the Father also. St. John laid stress upon the human life of Jesus Christ and showed how in the human Jesus was manifested the glory of God. Of that glory, through union with Christ, we are partakers. St. Paul and St. John are of one accord in this teaching. "We all with open face," wrote St. Paul, "reflecting as in a glass, the glory of the Lord are changed into the same image, from glory to glory as by the spirit of the Lord. For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

And all this experience was implied in the promise of our Lord to Nathanael "Ye shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Nathanael's mind had been set working by the study of Holy Scripture. Like the Ethiopian Eunuch in the Acts of the Apostles he must often have put the question to himself "Of whom saith the prophet this, of Himself or of some other man?" To ask the question is the thing that matters. It is the questions we ask which reveal what we are. They betray our thoughts and we are what we habitually think. "We are dyed the colour of our thoughts." It was in all sincerity that Nathanael asked the question. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? His sincerity was shown by his readiness to respond to Philip's invitation, "Come and see."

When our Lord referred to having seen him under
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the fig tree before Philip called him, we may suppose that he had retired under the tree in order to meditate on what he had been reading. The subject of his reading had been no doubt the vision of Jacob at Bethel, but he would be carried forward to that second appearance of God to Jacob when he wrestled all night long with the angel upon Peniel and would not let him go except he blessed him: It was then that the name Israel was given in place of Jacob. And it is as children of Israel, not children of Jacob, that his descendants are known. But even among the children of Israel distinctions were drawn, for all are not Israel who are of Israel. There was "an Israel of God," as St. Paul has said, and Nathanael was of that number, an Israelite indeed in whom there was no guile. To such as Nathanael is the vision given. They see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. They see God because they are pure in heart.

The story of Jacob is a record of the progress from faith to faith, of faith confirmed by further revelations of God to him. The Gospel of St. John is a similar record of the progress of faith, the confirmation of faith by further revelations of God in Jesus Christ, while side by side with it is the record of an unfaith hardening because men refused to come to the Light, loving darkness rather than light. Further, the angels ascending are typical of the hopes and aspirations of our hearts, which on Christ are carried to the very throne of God. "The Kingdom of God is within you," said Christ. "Look within thyself" was the direction of a teacher of old time. "I was looking for God without, said another, and lo! He was within me." Nathanael was one of those of whom the aged Simeon prophesied when he held the Infant Jesus in his arms. "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel and for a sign that shall be spoken against that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Jesus read the thoughts of Nathanael's heart, revealing to him his hopes and aspirations, confirming his faith that they

were bound up with the revelation of the Son of Man, with the promise of greater things to come. The lives of the saints are intended to confirm our faith. As they have been so may we become. Like them we may go from strength to strength till every one appeareth in Zion before God.