

Heaven Opened

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of January 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Heaven Opened and is from John chapter 1 verses 35 to 51.

Over these weeks from this Sunday through to Easter or just beyond Easter where we will be preaching through John's Gospel in the morning and the evening services.

And this passage follows on from the passage I preached on this morning. John's Gospel chapter 1. It's actually at the bottom of page 862 beginning at verse 35. The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples.

And as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, Look, here is the Lamb of God. The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus.

[1 : 0 8] When Jesus turned and saw them following he said to them, What are you looking for? They said to him, Rabbi, which translated means teacher, Where are you staying?

He said to them, Come and see. They came and saw where he was staying. And they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

He first found his brother Simon and said to him, We have found the Messiah, which is translated anointed. He brought Simon to Jesus who looked at him and said, You are Simon, son of John.

You are to be called Kephas, which is translated Peter. The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, Follow me.

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.

[2 : 1 9] Nathanael said to him, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, Come and see. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, He said of him, Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

Nathanael asked him, Where did you get to know me? Jesus answered, I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.

Nathanael replied, Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. Jesus answered, Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?

You will see greater things than these. And he said to him, Very truly I tell you, You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man.

Let's pray. God, we pray that you'll help us to understand this passage and to apply it in our lives so that we may live for your glory.

[3 : 3 4] Amen. In the olden days, if you had a banquet or a ball or some important function, there would be somebody who would announce your arrival.

You may have seen that in films like *An Ideal Husband*, where somebody announces the arrival of the Lord of Wessex or something like that. And the announcer's job is to make sure that he gets the titles right.

Because if you're a person with a title, then you like to be called by your proper title. And some people get very fussy about that. I remember once meeting the late Bishop of Ballarat, who made it very clear that he expected everybody to address him as, My Lord Bishop.

I thought that was a little bit pompous, but I didn't say that. And in Nigeria, people are very fussy about titles. When I was there recently, I met the Bishop of a place called Kano.

And he also, I noticed from other people ringing him up and calling into the office and his house while I was there, would all address him as Lord Bishop. Lord Bishop. And while I was there for me, he rang an archdeacon.

[4 : 46] And when the archdeacon answered the phone, he said, Venerable One, which was his title. My minister in England, when I was living there, used to complain when people would get the title reverend wrong.

And people always get this wrong. If a person is the Reverend Timothy Watson, which was his name, you say Mr. Watson, but you write a letter to the Reverend Timothy Watson.

But you don't actually walk up to him and say, Hello, Reverend. Although lots of people do that. And when he would get a letter that was addressed, Dear Reverend, he would send it back saying, This is wrong. It should be Dear Mr. Watson. He was very fussy about his titles.

Well, most of the examples I picked are from church. It's funny how church people are so fussy about their titles. We have reverends. We have canons. We have venerable ones. We have the very reverend, the right reverend, and the most reverend.

In fact, the Archbishop of Canterbury is the right honourable, the most reverend, because he's also a member of the House of Lords and therefore in Parliament. You've got to get the titles right if you're not going to make sure that you don't offend somebody.

[5 : 55] Well, in John's Gospel here, John the Baptist and others are the announcers of titles for Jesus. And in a sense, this chapter one is a compilation of various titles of Jesus.

He doesn't just have one title, Rabbi or something like that. There's a whole string of titles that are given to Jesus. Just like some of the people who are famous in, say, England have a whole list of titles.

The Queen is not only the Queen of England, but a whole lot of other things, Defender of the Faith and so on. And Prince Charles is the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Cornwall and all sorts of other things, no doubt as well.

Well, John the Baptist is the announcer here. And he's announcing an important person, Jesus, the most important person. He says in verse 23 of himself, I am the voice.

He's the announcer on the side, as we saw this morning. The one who is announcing the lead person, the main role, Jesus. And when the people come to John the Baptist wanting to know who are you and what's going on, he deflects their attention.

[7 : 02] He says, in effect, don't worry about me. Jesus is the one that you should be asking that question about. And throughout chapter 1, from various people, we get different titles and names for Jesus.

In verse 20, when they ask, who are you of John the Baptist, he says, I am not the Messiah. And the implication is, I'm not the Messiah, but the one who is about to come, who's already in your midst, he's the Messiah.

So there's the one title for Jesus already. And in verse 29, John the Baptist says, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. There's another title for Jesus.

And then in verse 34, John the Baptist says, and I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God. Another title for Jesus. Well, the next day, this is now the third day because initially, John was questioned on the first day and then the second day is when he announced, here is the Lamb of God.

And now the next day, the third day, if you like, John the Baptist again sees Jesus just passing by in the crowd. And again, he declares in verse 36, look, here is the Lamb of God.

[8 : 19] the one who all the Old Testament sacrifices point towards as we saw in this morning's passage from the earlier verses in this chapter.

The one who takes away the sin of the world. The one who the daily sacrifices, the Passover sacrifice, the Lamb that would be led to the slaughter in the book of Isaiah. In fact, all the sacrifices point in the end to this Lamb of God provided by God to take away the sin of the world.

He is the one who finally deals with the sin of the world. John's declared that already the day before and now he declares it again. And this time, the result of his declaring, look, there is the Lamb of God, is that two of his own disciples turn and follow Jesus.

As he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, look, here is the Lamb of God. the two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus.

And to follow Jesus there is not just to, just sort of to trail him down the street, is to follow as his disciple. So two of John the Baptist's disciples have changed from being followers of John the Baptist to followers of Jesus.

[9 : 42] All because John the Baptist said, look, there is the Lamb of God. John the Baptist's job, you see, is done. His job is, in effect, finished and by and large, he doesn't really occur again in the gospel, more or less.

His role is over. His role was to point to Jesus and to direct other people's attention to Jesus. And when his own disciples follow his pointing and follow Jesus and leave John the Baptist, his job is over.

He's done what he's meant to do. Announce Jesus and encourage people to follow him and believe in him. And that's what they've done. They've believed John the Baptist's testimony about who Jesus is and they've followed him.

And the writer of the gospel, the other John, is wanting us to do the same. That's why he's recorded this incident. Not just so that we know that some of John the Baptist's disciples decided to follow Jesus, but so that we, the readers of this gospel, will do the same thing and follow Jesus, become his disciples, believe in him and receive him.

That's why John wrote this gospel. So that we would do as John the Baptist's disciples have done. Incidentally, isn't it a mark of John the Baptist's greatness that he's actually wanting his own disciples to follow somebody else?

[11 : 19] So often, even Christian leaders are in the business of attracting people to follow them rather than pushing them to follow Jesus. John the Baptist, I guess, is an example of what Christian ministry should be like, although that's not primarily why he's mentioned here.

Directing people to Jesus should be what any Christian minister does. Indeed, what any Christian should do as well. Well, from now on, Jesus is center stage and John is hardly ever mentioned again, although his death does come up in some of the gospels.

Jesus now, though, is on center stage and it's to him that we turn. when Jesus turned and saw these two disciples of John now following him, he said to them, what are you looking for?

It's not a bad question. I'm not sure that they knew the answer, though. They respond with a question. Rabbi, which means teacher, where are you staying? I'm not sure that they were following him to find out where he was staying.

I think in asking him, where are you staying? They're indicating that they really do want to follow him. They don't quite understand, probably, what it is they'll get out of it, so to speak.

[12 : 36] They just know that he's the one to follow. And by saying, where are you staying? I think they're implying, can we stay with you? We want to follow you that much.

They use the title of Jesus here, Rabbi, which is a title of respect. It's not one of the greatest titles used of Jesus, but it's a fair title. He's the teacher.

That's what it means. Well, Jesus invites them to stay. In verse 39, he says to them, well, come and see where I'm staying, which is, in effect, an invitation to stay with him.

And they came and they saw where he was staying and they remained with him that day. But it implies, I think, not just that day until evening, but that they remain with him overnight.

The time that this began was four o'clock in the afternoon. Albert McMacon was a great Christian.

[13 : 36] I doubt, though, that you've ever heard of him. Maybe some of you know who I'm talking about. I wonder whether you know why he was a great Christian and what it was that Albert McMacon did that made him a great Christian.

He invited somebody else to come to Jesus. But we don't know Albert McMacon's name or maybe one or two of you know it. But I'm sure that if not all of us, almost all of us know the name of the person that he invited to come to Jesus.

Because that person, the person that Albert McMacon invited to come to Jesus, is the reason for the biggest ever crowd at the MCG. And he wasn't a full forward for Carlton.

He's a person that I heard speak in Sydney in 1979 at Randwick Racecourse along with several, many thousands of other people. He's the person who is believed to have spoken to the most people in the world's history through his public speaking live.

His name's Billy Graham and most of us would have heard of him. But scarcely any of us would have heard of Albert McMacon. A bit of an unknown but a great Christian because he invited somebody else to come to Jesus.

[15 : 02] That other person is great and well known and famous. But Albert McMacon is no less a Christian. The first disciple that's mentioned here in John's Gospel is Andrew.

Not one of the great disciples. We know his name at least but Andrew's always defined as being Peter's brother. It's Peter who's famous. And I guess some of you who've had older brothers or sisters or famous spouses would find yourself being introduced as, oh this is Fred's wife or this is Mary's husband or this is Joe's brother or something like that.

It's a bit of a put down sometimes isn't it? I mean you want to be a person in your own right. Andrew's sort of a bit of a nobody. He's Simon Peter's brother and Simon Peter was famous.

But it's Andrew who brings Peter to Jesus. A bit like Albert McMacon bringing Billy Graham to Jesus. Billy Graham's the famous one.

Peter was the famous one. But Andrew did his job. He invited somebody else his brother in this occasion to come to Jesus the Messiah.

[16 : 17] He says we've found the Messiah. Come. It's a model for all Christians I think. Come to Jesus. Find the Messiah.

So in verse 40 one of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew. We don't even know the name of the other one. Some think it's John who wrote the gospel but we can't be sure of that either.

Andrew is Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon. It's the first thing he did after staying with Jesus for the night. We found the Messiah. There's excitement in those words.

It's not just sort of going home to tell his brother where he'd been for the night and said oh look we found the Messiah. He's excited and he wants Peter to come and meet him. He wants Peter to follow him as well.

The Messiah is translated anointed and there's another name another title for Jesus that we find in this passage. This one's a bit more important than just Rabbi. Messiah means anointed one.

[17 : 22] Somebody in a public office would be anointed with oil. In the Old Testament usually and always the king occasionally the high priest like Aaron in the book of Exodus and very occasionally a prophet such as Elisha.

The Messiah was the expected king prophet priest to come. The one who would lead God's people perfectly. So when Andrew says we've found the Messiah he's saying something very big about Jesus.

it's an important title. It's one we're used to because the Greek word for Messiah is Christ and we always talk about Jesus Christ but Christ wasn't his surname it was a title the Messiah.

Well Andrew brings Simon to Jesus and Jesus when he meets him looks at him the idea is looking intently at him as though he can almost look through him and he said to him you are Simon son of John which of course is right because that's who he is you are to be called Kephas which is translated Peter but in Greek it's rock or a word related to rock.

No explanation of the name change is given here though in Matthew's gospel we're told that Simon would be called Peter because he's the rock on which Christ will build a church but none of that's given here the change of name though is a mark of authority to name something signifies your authority over that Peter is in effect becoming a new person here as he begins to follow the Messiah and Jesus is showing his authority over Peter in giving him a new name.

[19 : 13] Well all these events happened by the Jordan River a place called Bethany on the far side of the Jordan in the modern kingdom of Jordan rather than in Israel or the West Bank we're told that back in verse 28 but Jesus now decides to return to Galilee Galilee is up the north up the Jordan valley to the sea of Galilee that's where Jesus had been brought up in Nazareth and around there was Capernaum Bethsaida and other places like that we don't know why Jesus is down south at this point but he's decided it's time to go back up north but we do know that he goes to a wedding in chapter 2 a couple of days later and maybe he's realized that it's time to get going so that he's there for the wedding Jesus calls Philip to follow him in verse 43 this is the one person in this list of people that Jesus takes the initiative with Andrew is pointed in the right direction by John the Baptist

Andrew gets Peter to come along with him Andrew was already accompanied by one of John's disciples and later on Philip will get somebody else to follow Jesus but Philip is the only one that Jesus personally goes out of his way to call to follow him he found Philip rather than vice versa and said to him follow me now Philip we're told is from Bethsaida which is the same city of Andrew and Peter Bethsaida literally means a fishing town fishermen live there that's why it's got that name it's on the sea of Galilee which is still even today full of fish that are edible and there are lots of fishing boats there it's not far from Capernaum which is where Jesus makes his base later on we know that Peter's mother-in-law lives in Capernaum and that seems to be where Jesus and his disciples live but Bethsaida is the place just around the coast a little bit from

Capernaum where Philip and Andrew and Peter come from well just as Andrew had done with Peter so Philip does with a man called Nathaniel though he's not his brother it's just a friend it seems Philip found Nathaniel in verse 45 and said to him we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth now strictly speaking what Philip actually said there is the words you've got but in the in a different order the one about who Moses in the law and the prophets wrote we found him it's almost as though Philip had been talking to Nathaniel at some point about who is it that Moses and the prophets have written about and he goes to find Nathaniel and says the one that Moses was writing about and the prophets was writing about we found him there's excitement here in

Philip's words as there was in Andrew's words Moses in the law refers to the first five books of the Old Testament there's not a lot there that talks about the Messiah to come though it does talk about the prophet like Moses who will come in the future I suspect that of all verses is probably what is being referred to here but in the prophets well there are lots of things in Isaiah in Jeremiah Ezekiel Zechariah and other prophets there's a lot of expectation of one a king or a righteous person or a servant who will come and lead God's people and restore God's people to God to put the law and the prophets together as Philip is doing in this verse maybe in fact just saying what the whole of the Old Testament is pointing towards the one that the whole of the Old Testament is looking forward to has come is what

Philip is in effect saying and it's Jesus come and see him when Nathaniel's not very convinced partly because Philip has said that the one that the whole of the Old Testament points towards is a person called Jesus who is the son of Joseph as was commonly thought and he's from Nazareth now it's like saying that the Messiah has come from Geelong I mean who on earth would ever really of importance come from Geelong I mean if you were important you'd come from Melbourne or if you were really important you'd be born in Sydney but who would come from Geelong well Nazareth was even less of a tin pot town than Geelong is it was probably only a couple of hundred people in Jesus day it was very insignificant it's never mentioned in the Old Testament it was just a tiny little place on a hill overlooking the Jezreel valley in

[24 : 23] Galilee Nathaniel knew of it because we're told later on in John's gospel that Nathaniel came from Cana which is the place where the wedding is in the next chapter Cana is not all that far from Nazareth I suppose today if the traffic's good which it never is it would be a ten minute drive given the traffic today it's about half an hour's drive but they're local little tiny places maybe there's a sense of rivalry here where Nathaniel says can anything good come out of Nazareth maybe like a Carlton supporter saying can anything good come out of Collingwood well we know the answer is no to that anyway Nazareth is just a tin pot town how can you expect the Messiah to come from Nazareth and Philip's response is not to argue the point he says come and see he invites him to come to Jesus doesn't go into a long apologetic or lengthy argument come and see

Jesus focus on Jesus because he is who I'm saying he is the Messiah that the Old Testament has promised before for us to but that doesn't in any way stop us from believing because John makes it clear in his gospel that for us who are unable to see because we live in a different time are nonetheless able to believe John's words in this gospel are the means by which we can do that. So when we see Nathaniel being told come and see, for us we're not at a disadvantage.

We can come and read and come and see therefore that Jesus is who we're being told he is. And we can still place our trust in him, believe in him, receive him and be blessed of God as John tells us at the end of his gospel. Well Jesus' response to Nathaniel is rather astonishing. I'm not sure that it really is the best social etiquette to respond to a new person like this.

But anyway, up comes Nathaniel to Jesus, he's never met him before and Jesus says to him, here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. That's a fairly astonishing sort of statement to make and I'm sure that if Jesus made it of you and you'd never met Jesus, you'd be a little bit sort of put off by that.

I guess Nathaniel was a bit even if it is true. Who is this person who can say these things about me? Now why is Jesus saying that sort of thing? Why doesn't he just say something straightforward to Nathaniel?

[27 : 13] I guess there are a couple of reasons. One is that it's an accurate statement about who Nathaniel is. He seems to be genuinely a person without deceit or without guile.

somebody who is honest and sincere. Somebody who's prepared to look at the truth about Jesus. Nathaniel doesn't disagree with the assessment that Jesus makes of him which in part also reinforces the fact that it's a true statement about him.

In fact, Nathaniel's amazed at Jesus' knowledge. How did you get to know me? He says in verse 48. And then when Jesus says well I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you it's hardly a convincing answer to the question but Nathaniel's response just goes over the top surely.

He says to him in verse 49 Rabbi you are the son of God you're the king of Israel. That's a big turnaround from somebody who's just said can anything good come out of Nazareth? To suddenly say you're the king of Israel.

You're the son of God. More titles for Jesus. And they're great titles indeed. But in making those titles Nathaniel's also saying something significant about himself.

[28 : 24] He's just been told by Jesus that you truly are an Israelite in whom there is no guile and Nathaniel responds by saying you are the king of Israel. That is you're the Lord.

You have the authority and by acknowledging that he is an Israelite and Jesus is the king of Israel he's in effect saying to Jesus I submit to you you're my king you're in charge.

But I think Jesus' words to Nathaniel actually run a little bit deeper as well. When Jesus says here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit he's not only saying something that is just an accurate assessment of Nathaniel's character.

In the Bible the deceitful one the deceitful person is Jacob. In the book of Genesis Jacob through deceit and trickery wins his elder twin brother's birthright.

Later on Jacob is renamed Israel. Jacob and Jacob also is given a vision of a ladder between heaven and earth and angels on that ladder.

[29 : 49] The context then is that Jacob though a deceitful one has his name changed but is given a vision of God in effect meeting with earth.

Jesus has called Nathaniel an Israelite in whom there is no deceit or as one commentator says an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob and to him to Nathaniel Jesus promises something that is better than Jacob's vision.

Jacob is clearly in the forefront here because Jesus says to Nathaniel in verse 50 do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree you'll see greater things than these very truly I tell you you'll see heaven opened and angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man that's clearly a reference to the vision that Jacob had but it's promised to a person without guile or deceit and it's better than Jacob's vision because this is not just a vision or a dream this is the real thing that Nathaniel is being promised here Jesus is promising that he will open heaven for humanity that he himself is the access point for earth to enter heaven and in saying these words and in recording them for us we're having the scene set for the things that follow the miracles of turning water into wine and feeding the 5,000 and healing various people they're all glimpses of heaven being opened and coming down to earth but then when we read further on to the cross and the death of Jesus and his resurrection we see in a sense the entry point to heaven for earth through Jesus and what he does in dying and rising when Jacob had his vision he declared this is an awesome place and he named it Bethel the house of God

I think Jesus wants Nathaniel and the gospel writer wants us to say not this is an awesome place but this is an awesome person and rather than the house of God being a place the house of God is the person Jesus you see the big difference between Jacob's vision and what Jesus is promising Nathaniel is that there is no ladder the angels ascend and descend on Jesus himself he's the access point he's the connecting point between heaven and earth and we have to say what an awesome person that is who can bring heaven to earth and take earth to heaven well in this chapter lots of titles have been piled up about

Jesus just like somebody important in our own day and age has many titles so here does Jesus in the first verse of the chapter and the book he is the word in fact he's God he's called a rabbi he's called the Messiah he's called the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world he's called the son of God he's called the king of Israel words that either John the gospel writer or John the Baptist or Nathanael or Andrew or others have ascribed to Jesus Christ but the final title stands out the very end of the chapter the last words the son of man the title stands out because it's the one thing that Jesus calls himself all the other titles are by other people about Jesus but now Jesus gives us his own title for himself the son of man it's a little bit ambiguous it's not very pretentious but but its background lies like all the others in the old testament in

[34 : 31] Daniel chapter seven in the book of the prophets we find a picture of the son of man a glorious figure a divine figure and a figure of authority on clouds who rules and whose reign will be forever Jesus is saying I'm that one I'm that son of man well the gospel writer John is wanting us to come to the same conclusions about Jesus as John the Baptist did as Andrew did as Simon Peter did as Philip did as Nathaniel did as the other followers of Jesus did he wants us the readers to declare that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world including ours the gospel writer wants us to acknowledge that Jesus is the king of Israel and we submit to him as true

Israelites John the gospel writer is wanting us or inviting us to see even greater things than these he's inviting us to read on to the next chapter and the miracle of water into wine beyond even to further miracles and healings but beyond that to the glory of the cross and the resurrection they're the greatest things and we're being invited to keep on reading to keep on seeing so that we may believe in him and receive him as our king and as our savior let's pray oh god we thank you that Jesus Christ is the Messiah is the son of god the lamb of god the word of god the king of israel the son of man we thank you that in

Jesus Christ you are keeping all those old testament promises that you would send somebody to restore fallen humanity to yourself to reconnect heaven and earth we thank you that Jesus Christ is that one help us to believe in him to receive him and follow him amen