

James' Profession John 1:45-57

Whether we are aware of it or not, God the Holy Spirit calls each of us individually to a way of life uniquely tailored to our particular personal makeup. We spend our lives stumbling along with somewhat impaired sight, trying to find God's way to be happy because that is the only way it can really happen.

Jesus heard his unique vocation declared to him through a voice from heaven at his baptism, but I think most people find their vocation in life more often through human contacts than through voices from heaven.

This was the case with Nathaniel. Philip told him about Jesus. He said he believed they had discovered the Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth. Nathaniel was sceptical: "Can anything good come from that dump?" Or words to that effect. So Philip challenged him to come and meet Jesus. The meeting changed the course of his life.

Speaking for myself, the several stages, so far, in discovering my vocation in life have generally come through personal contact with people.

I discovered science through a Dr Van Praagh (known as Veep) who later in life acquired an international reputation and wrote books about teaching science. My discovery of the religious life came through a wise and understanding parish priest in London. My discovery of the Franciscans came in stages. Strange men in brown costumes came two or three times to our school to conduct voluntary services in chapel on Wednesday evenings in Lent. I wasn't very religious and didn't attend such things, but I remember seeing them.

Then, in my mid-twenties, having failed dismally at everything I had tried to do and very confused about my future, I glimpsed a brother from the top of a bus, walking down the Whitechapel Road in Stepney. I was intrigued. I made enquiries and eventually arranged to visit the Friary at Hillfield. Meeting the eccentric and charismatic Father Algy and the other brothers I felt a strong sense of coming home. Ten years later it would have been seen as 'hippy' and it was quite primitive and Spartan, but there was joy and humour and a warm welcome.

My journey didn't end there, of course. There have been several vocations within my Franciscan vocation since then, and they also have involved contact with people – inspiring individuals or, sometimes, attraction to people with an unmet need of some kind.

I know very little of James' life story but I wonder how much his present decision to make his profession in SSF is the result of mystical visions or auditions and how much, like Nathaniel and me, it is more the result of personal encounters.

Not that I think that personal encounters are the whole story. There has to be a particular environment or situation and an inner inclination. I suspect, like the others, Nathaniel was caught up in the political unrest and religious hopes of the Jewish people of his time. There is a sense of spiritual hunger in society today, and attraction to our community seems often to include something of that, plus an attraction to a simple life and compassion for those we refer to as disadvantaged.

Now, let's look at that strange dialogue between Jesus and Nathaniel. It seems that Jesus already knew Nathaniel and

described his character. "How do you know me?" Nathaniel asked. "I saw you sitting under the fig tree," Jesus replied. Nathaniel's response is really rather astonishing: "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel." – two Messianic titles. That was a huge leap from the sceptical response he had made to Philip. Even Jesus seemed surprised: "Just because I said I saw you under the fig tree?" He said.

Then he adds something very enigmatic: "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." What a weird metaphor!

Let me remind you of the story in Genesis about Jacob's ladder. In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder going up to heaven with angels climbing up and down it. Jesus' metaphor suggests he is more than just the saviour of Israel; he is the way to heaven. He is Jacob's ladder. John's Jesus says, quite simply, "I am the way." In the ancient cosmology of the time, heaven was up in the sky, but Jesus referred to it as being here around us. The kingdom is the world ruled by the love of God, and Jesus implied it could be seen through him: "He who has seen me has seen the Father." After Jacob woke up he exclaimed, "This is an awesome place; this is the gate of heaven!" According to Jesus, our entry into heaven begins, not at some pearly gates in the sky, but right here and now if we will recognise it. We should say, with Jacob, "This is an awesome place."

Some years ago, Brother James found out about Saint Francis and about SSF, and must have thought it might be a ladder to heaven. He met Brothers and Sisters of the First and Third Orders in New Zealand and realised that they were not angels; they were ordinary people like him, trying to absorb the spirit of St Francis and live by

the Principles of our Society. He has now reached a point where he wants to make a public declaration of his wish to commit himself to the very diverse and odd collection of people that make up the SSF brothers. He hasn't had exactly the same dream as Jacob, or even thought much about that probably, but the essential experience must have been similar.

We're here today to support and encourage James in placing his foot on a particular rung of a particular ladder. Those climbing it are definitely not angels. But the cosmic ladder, so to speak, is not a particular organization; it is the Son of Man, Jesus. We are just fellow climbers.

All this is not necessarily about a formally religious vocation. Most of you here have made a life commitment to Christ in the Church. You may not have been aware of it, but you put your foot on the bottom rung of Jacob's ladder. James' profession could be a prompt to take a look at our own vocation within the Body of Christ, religious or secular. There is always a rung above the one you're standing on. If we can see Jesus, the Son of Man, crucified and risen, as the "ladder" to heaven, we might think about that.