

St Michael & All Angels; St Paul's Cathedral, 2020

Daniel 7:9-19, 13-14; Psalm 128, Revelation 12:7-12a, John 1:45-51

Thirty years ago this week, on the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, 29 September 1990, I was ordained a deacon in Ballarat. I was 24 and three-quarters – barely of canonical age – and in my final year of a Theology degree. I was a candidate for priesthood, and a further laying on of hands was slated in just over 10 months.

A first curacy had been arranged in the Parish where I was placed as a theological student. It was a setting in which I felt comfortable. Much that had been would continue, or so it seemed.

The trip to Thailand came out of left field. On the way home from a conference in Europe, the Director of Trinity College Theological School stopped over in Bangkok and stayed with the priest of that city's one Anglican church. Over dinner they hatched a plan to send final-year students from Trinity on a field trip to experience something of this parish's mission.

Two of us were offered the chance to participate in the 'pilot' of what would become more formal unit of study. I was approached as I exited my last exam in early November, and within a week was on a plane.

We spent just over six weeks working with the Vicar of Bangkok and his team. It was shambolic, disorienting, confronting, exhilarating, and exhausting. A week-long visit to the Karen refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border was among the more challenging components for this newly ordained deacon, together with exposure to the Immigration Detention Centre, men's and women's prisons, slum districts, and the Parish's ministry to local sex workers when HIV was endemic.

We were neither briefed, nor de-briefed. A friend of mine arrived in Bangkok on our last night, just before Christmas, and the three of us shared a welcome hotel room. I don't think he knew what he'd struck as these two 'theologs' wept their way through his duty-free bottle of gin! What was I being asked to see, I wonder, so far outside my comfort zone, called out from under a safe canopy, my fig tree?

By the time I surfaced and took up my curacy, ordination to the priesthood was just a few months away. Would that I could find a copy of the letter I wrote to my bishop asking for more time as a deacon. Ten frenetic months to experience the distinctive grace of this foundational order of ministry did not seem enough. Please Bishop, may I have some more? In his rather mercurial wisdom, John Hazlewood agreed to this unusual request, and postponed my priesting until the following year.

In the messiness of all that, I became more deeply aware of the emblematic nature of the diaconate. The servant leadership of the deacon embodies the vocation of all those baptised into Christ, who is our great high priest and our great archdeacon.

As Anglicans, our sense of being called to participate in God's mission to the world is grounded in worship. It is in worship we are gathered and formed by God's gracious invitation; and it is our worship that sends us out into the world God loves to exercise baptismal ministry, lay and ordained.

At the ordination of Belinda Seabrook as Deacon here in February I reflected that one of the most important symbolic actions a deacon can perform in the Eucharist is to carry the Gospel book out of church in procession at the end of the service.

As we watch the Gospel book held aloft and going before us into the community, our baptismal calling is symbolically enacted. We follow the deacon out of church and into our jobs, our classes, our homes, our leisure activities, our social circles, our conversations, our consuming, our voting, our volunteering, our conflict, our carbon footprints and whatever else the week holds for us, carrying the Gospel.

The Book of Revelation from which our second reading comes has a strong liturgical feel: celestial choirs, heavenly sanctuaries, divine tabernacling, angels and archangels, and clouds of incense! In today's passage the author hears a voice, but John the Seer, as he is sometimes known, is more often shown things in this text – invited to see, to behold a new a vision, often set in the context of worship.

Using apocalyptic or end-time imagery, like that of Daniel, John interprets the present situation of the churches he's addressing, more so than the future, including their geo-political context in Asia Minor, where they are struggling to maintain integrity under Roman rule.

In this sense it is prophetic: calling the churches back to their true identity in the vulnerable Lamb of God, within human history that has not been abandoned by God, despite much evidence to the contrary.

At the same time, John's readers are shown a vision of God's future. The young churches in Asia Minor could be sure that even the death-dealing imperial might of Rome would ultimately be no match for the life-giving if costly victory of the Lamb.

Our enforced abstinence from gathered worship reminds us just how important worship is in the life of the Church: not for its own sake, but in diaconal service.

Dorothy Lee explains (*Hallowed in Truth and Love*, 252-53) that in Revelation:

Sacred ritual is not a delicacy to be enjoyed by aesthetes . . . but [is] intrinsic to . . . ethics. True worship indicates where the heart lies; it becomes the foundation of radical action . . . The obverse is also true: the essence of sin in Revelation is idolatry . . . read[iness] to bow the knee to whatever will guarantee prosperity and comfort.

Like John the Seer, Nathanael, who is seen under the fig tree, is himself invited to come and see; a call echoing that of Jesus, and echoed by the woman at the well in John's gospel.

In the Hebrew Bible fig trees have always been a symbol of refuge, from the story when Adam and Eve sewed their leaves together to cover their shame onwards.

To be sitting under a fig tree suggests a state of peace and security; a time of repose when all is well and God is in God's heaven: an image of the landowner freed from oppression, as under King Solomon when reportedly all lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree (1 Ki 4:25).

Clearly the author of that text had not seen the fig trees at Bishops court, enjoyed mostly by birds and bats!

If there's a sense of contentment here, there's no suggestion that it amounts to the idolizing of prosperity that Revelation has in view. Indeed, when Jesus sees Nathanael in such a state he acknowledges his integrity, as one without guile, or deceit.

Yet Nathanael is in for an awakening of sorts. Jesus calls him, via Philip's testimony, from the life he knew to one Nathanael could not have imagined, as is evident from his rhetorical question, 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

With all due respect to first-century Nazareth, might we recast Nathanael's question today: Can anything good come out of COVID-19?

Or, to put it another way, while resisting any instrumental reading of the pandemic, what might God be asking us to see anew or afresh in this moment?

Perhaps we've been hearing that invitation on the lips of Philip as a summons to others to come and see what the Church has to offer: come and see our fine buildings, come and see our beautiful worship, come and see our many programs, and yes – in and through the integrity of all of that – come and see Jesus.

If so, can we hear it differently today, as a call to us to come out from under our fig trees – those canopies beneath which we are accustomed to gathering, and sheltering, and drawing comfort – and to see even greater things than these: not easy things; but – like Nathanael – more than we had imagined might be possible.

In a Zoom catch up we had for the clergy of the Diocese in August, one priest described the pandemic as catalysing a kind of 'coming out' for our churches, liturgically and missionally, and many expressed the worry that post-COVID – whenever that may be and whatever it may look like – we could all-too-easily go back into our shell, or crawl under our fig trees.

What is the Spirit saying to the churches, to borrow the language of Revelation?

What is God doing in the lives of people whose fig trees have been uprooted by this crisis, and are seeking new ways to connect and make-meaning?

May we, with Nathanael, show a willingness to ask if anything good can come from this – even if only rhetorically at first – and then the courage to get out from under our safe canopies, to follow the gospel out of our churches and into the world, and come and see.

+Richard Gippsland