In our first lesson from the Book of Samuel we have a description of Hell. It is a terrifying condemnation of Israel under the Judges that followed Joshua and an insight into the spiritual decline that beset them as a people. “Now in those days the word of the Lord was seldom heard, and no vision was granted.” Why is this situation so awful? Because with the act of creation and the making of human beings in the image of God, a covenant was made. On the side there’s God – the God who gave all of Godself. God totally revealed Godself as Jehovah Jirah (the one who provides, the one who sustains, the one who indwells all things). The God who loves and in that love created the heavens and earth, and populated it in the abundance of grace. It is and was a totally free bestowal. On the other side, there’s the response of human beings and through them all created things. A response of total obedience. What does obedience mean? It’s not a word at all in fashion. But it’s root lies in the verb ‘to hear’. It is not slavish submission to a tyrannical overlord. It is continual attentiveness or listening to God’s free gift of love and life. To listen is to be continually open to the presence of God in God’s creation. We didn’t create ourselves. We are dependent. We renounce that dependence when we stop being open. When we stop listening. When we close down all the spaces and times where we are unable to sit, silently; wait, humbly – and just receive. And we will receive because that is the covenant God made and fulfills, eternally. As Jesus in the wilderness reminds Satan when tempted with the provision of bread in the desert, human beings live on every word that flows from the mouth of God. That is our condition. That is our created nature. That is the way we are sustained in true life; living. We do not have life within ourselves.

And yet here we are in the time of the Judges when the word of the Lord was seldom heard and people were going their own way, ignorant of the covenant written into the order of all created things. And there was no vision. In the Book of Proverbs we’re told
“without a vision the people perish.” Oh they can sustain themselves, and a belief in themselves, after a fashion. But it is not a divine fashion. We can entertain and be entertained. We can eat and drink. We can feast and be festive. We can walk by and walk over the social devastation all around us; drawing our pay, paying our mortgage, waiting for the weekend, or the summer holiday or Christmas; building walls of defense with our friendships, our families, our perceived status, our careers, our ambitions, our poetry and our music. But this is not living as God intended us, and all created things, to live. As far as true living is concerned this is a long walk into darkness in which the more vocal blind lead the less vocal blind and everyone ends up confused and self-deceived; wandering round and round, never determining because never seeing the way ahead. There’s a lovely English word for this condition: benighted. Exiled and benighted. Belonging to nothing and no one. Homeless. Alienated. Strangers one from another.

I’m walking across Midsummer Common in Cambridge. It’s a large open space fringed with horse chestnuts just outside the city. In the Middles Ages this is where the plague victims were buried in their hundreds – large lime-pit common graves. It’s late autumn. The grass is dank, the trees leafless, the day heavy and grey. It’s afternoon but no one seems about. I always cross the parkland aware of those bodies beneath my feet. It’s not frightening particularly. It’s more a matter of paying my respects. But then I see someone approaching along the same path that I’m taking. It’s a very striking young woman with thick auburn hair. She reminds me of Adele. It might indeed have been Adele. She’s expensively dressed for the autumn in a long camel coloured coat, tailored and belted at the waist. She’s talking to someone on her mobile. Oblivious to me. But we are going to pass each other. Two solitary people in a wide public space. As we cross I hear her say to whoever: “I feel as though my life hasn’t really begun.” And that’s all I hear as she continues one way, and I in the opposite direction. And that was it. But whenever I think of those who live without God, those who live as if God is not always speaking (even in, most within, the depths of silence) then that memory returns. In part, it returns because the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert, said something similar in one of his last letters: “I’m not sure I’ve ever really lived.” There’s a quiet pathos here. Not suffering. Not abjection and pain. But the recognition, as intimate as it is profound, of something missing; of something known in some inner and yet unavailable way that calls for our being attentive. But we haven’t time. Like those regular system updates our computers and laptops tell us about. Not now, it’s inconvenient. Perhaps later – this evening, remind me tomorrow, when the house is paid for, when the kids are grown up, when I’ve
found someone I want to spend my life with, when I feel financially secure, when I’ve established my career. That perennial sense: “I feel as though my life hasn’t really begun.”

Is that what Nathaniel felt in our gospel reading, standing beneath the fig-tree? Knowing something’s missing and finding nothing to appease the dull ache of a continually unfulfilled hope, can make you cynical. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” “Come and see.” And Nathaniel attends; he listens; he’s obedient; he conquers the skepticism that comes from too much disappointment. “How do you know me?” he asks. “I saw you,” Jesus replies – and what a wealth of meaning lies behind that seeing? God sees into the very depths of our hearts, however deep the darkness in which we wander within ourselves. Love knows. Nathaniel recognizes some expectation has been met that he has lived with, probably, for a long time – the gravel in his heart is being washed through. Expectation always keeps us open, listening, attentive. “You are the Son of God,” he confesses. Love laughs: “is this the ground of your faith, that I told you I saw you under the fig-tree?” Love welcomes: “you shall see heaven wide open.”

The table in the wildness is laid. Here is bread. Here is wine. Here is Christ. Love that knows. Love that welcomes. Where are you? Come, let’s see these angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.