

SERMON 19th July 2026

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

The word *maqom* was one of the first words I learned in Hebrew, *maqom*. I was working on a Kibbutz at the end 1990s and there was a t-shirt which everyone wore. On it was a picture of the world and arrows pointing to the kibbutz, Kibbutz Amiad. It read, 'Amiad, all roads lead to this place.' And the word for place, *maqom*, was in bold with a playful font. It stuck in my mind. All roads lead to this place, all roads lead to this *maqom*. The point being made, of course, was that although Kibbutz Amiad is just a place, any place, a place indistinguishable from any other place in the world, nevertheless for those who lived in Kibbutz Amiad it was *the* place, a special place, the place to which they might return to from wherever they had gone in the world. It was their home.

A place is just a place until it isn't just a place, but becomes *the* place. This morning, for us here in St. Ninian's, all roads have led to this place, this church building, here. But, not only that, this morning all roads have led not just to this place, this building, but to this word, this word place.

In our reading this morning from the book of Genesis about Jacob and his dream of a stairway to heaven, Jacob lay down to sleep and dream when, the reading says, 'he reached a certain place.' This place, this *maqom*, was just a place, an anonymous place where Jacob decided, seemingly at random, to spend the night because the sun had set. It wasn't even a comfortable place; he had to use a stone for a pillow. The literary features of the text emphasise this point. In Old Testament narrative, if a word is repeated several times, that often serves as the marker for a literary theme. In this story about Jacob sleeping in this place, dreaming of a stairway to heaven upon which angels of God are ascending and descending, the word place is repeated, six times.

In the translation we read, the translators have omitted two of these occurrences of the word place to smooth the text and make it easier to read. But in Hebrew, Jacob first comes upon a certain *place*, he then takes a stone, the text reads, of that *place* and he lies down, the text reads, in that *place*. After his dream, Jacob declares that 'Indeed, the Lord is in this *place*,' before poetically declaring, the text reads, that the *place* is fearsome, and then, the text says, that he 'called the name of that *place* Bethel...'. Bethel, or Beit-El, means the House of God: *beit* is the Hebrew word for house, and *El* is one of the Hebrew names for God. So, he called that place the House of God, or we could say the place of God.

This repetition of the word place as a literary thematic marker emphasises that Jacob stopped for the night in some place, any place, a random place, an anonymous place, but then over the course of the story this place, any place, becomes for Jacob *the* place, a significant place, so significant that he takes the stone he has used as a pillow and he reuses that stone to mark that place.

At this point in his life, Jacob is lost. It is not at all clear who he will become, where he will live, and who he will live with. He has no place in the world. He has acquired his older brother's birthright and stolen his father's blessing, but it is not yet clear to him what this will mean for his life. He has been told by his mother to leave his home because his brother Esau has vowed to kill him. His father has commanded him not to marry a local woman, but

instead to travel back to his mother's family and find a wife for himself there. That will prove to be no easy nor a quickly accomplished task.

Then, in the story that follows, Jacob dreams of a stairway to heaven upon which angels of God ascend and descend, and above all he hears the Lord's promise to be with him, keep him, and bring him back. This is how Jacob is given a place in the world: not by the dream as an experience in itself, but by the God who meets him there and binds him to his covenant promise.

From this point on Jacob is no longer simply at the mercy of his mother's hopes for him, or his father's wish for him, or his brother's intentions. He is met by the Lord's gracious promise: 'I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.' Jacob will become a person who has a place in the world, literally he has a special place, but he also has a purpose, a task to do, and consequently he will have a family to do it with. He has a place on the earth, he has a place in God's purposes, and he will have a place in relation to others.

This is a short, but vivid story of a young man finding his place, and that is something many of us can identify with because although this is a story that takes place in a longer narrative about God and God's action in human lives, it is also a story that speaks to ordinary human questions of belonging, purpose, home, and relationship.

At some point in our lives, most of us have to leave what is familiar and step out into the world, a world that can feel, at first, like a vast, random, ill-defined place; and when we do, we may feel that we are small, insignificant actors in this place that is the world, society, culture, country, community.

In life, we are called by God to become someone particular who does something particular, not just anyone doing anything. We need somewhere to live that is our own, our home, our house, not just anywhere to lay our heads. We need particular relationships with particular people, not just any kind of relationships with anyone or everyone. In life, we are called into particular ways of belonging: becoming someone, living somewhere, doing something with some others.

That is often most obvious to parents of young people, parents who may worry about what their sons and daughters will do in the world, whom they will do it with, and where they will live doing the thing they do with the people they do it with. Many parents know something of that concern, just as Isaac and Rebekah were concerned for Jacob's future. But we worry about ourselves in these respects also. And we do so, not just once when we go out into the world, but at many points in our lives. Retirement, for example, can pose these questions in a new form: who are you when paid work no longer structures your days, where might you live as you grow older, who will be part of your daily life, and, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?

In the reading about Jacob and his dream, for the story of God's relationship with human beings to proceed Jacob must discover answers to these questions. For many of us, at different points in our lives, similar questions press upon us too: who are we, where are we to live, what are we to do, and with whom are we to do it?

Where do we find the answers to these questions? That is also part of the story. Where do we find the answers to these questions? Not just any answers, found anywhere, offering anything, but the answers that matter: answers found in the right place, with the right

people, doing the right thing, and under the right guidance. Anyone can do anything with anyone anywhere. But what should you or I do, where should we do it, and with whom?

Jacob dreamt, and he dreamt of a stairway that rested on earth with its top reaching heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. When we find ourselves in this world, this vast place surrounded by all these people, with so many choices about what we should do, where we should go, how we should behave, this story says look up.

Look up and connect this place with *the* place, the highest place. Set your sights on the pinnacle of what is good and true and honest and just and merciful and loving, and seek these things from God, who alone is their source. Then, descend to this place, this earth, this world, this community, this country, these people and if you keep in mind, hold in your heart, fix in your sight all that is good and true and honest and just and merciful and loving; that which is at the pinnacle, at the top of the stairway, that which is of God, then by the grace of God you will discover your place, your rightful place, and you will discover what you should do in this place, and whom you should do it with.

So perhaps the gift of Jacob's story is that we are not always in the place we would have chosen, nor the place we would have named as holy in advance. In whatever place we find ourselves, with whomever, doing whatever we are doing, at whatever time in our life, that place may be a random place, or a hard place, or a lonely place, or a place reached only because, like Jacob, the sun has set and we could go no further.

But, if we have faith in the grace of God as shown in the person of Jesus Christ, and despite it all – or even, perhaps, because of it all – we look up, and put God in his place, on the pinnacle, on the highest point, and if we then strive to ascend to that pinnacle, we can then descend to the place where we are, certain in God's promise that God is saying to us, as God said to Jacob, 'I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.' Then, we need not fear the vastness of the world or the uncertainty of the road ahead. Instead, we may rise, take up the life given to us, and step forward, strive upward in faith, trusting that in every place God can show us our place, and in every journey God can lead us home.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.