

Sermon for Sunday 17 January 2021 - Second Sunday of Epiphany

Readings: 1 Samuel 3: 1 to 10 and John 1: 43 to end

‘Come and See’

Last week the theme of our service was baptism including Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. In this week’s gospel reading, this time from John’s gospel, we hear how Jesus went on from his baptism to call some of his early disciples – in this case Philip and Nathanael.

This account is part of an almost breathless telling by John the gospel writer of Jesus’ activities in the early days of his ministry. Jesus is described in the first few verses of the gospel as ‘the Word made flesh who dwelt amongst us’. Then he’s baptized and starts to call his first followers. Every few verses we see the phrase ‘the next day’ as Jesus’ ministry rapidly takes shape. And then in verse 43 ‘the next day’, Jesus sets off to Galilee where he calls Philip to follow him. And Philip calls his friend Nathanael to meet Jesus.

Sometimes Jesus says ‘follow me’ as to Philip and to Andrew before him, and at other times the new disciple calls a friend or brother to come and meet Jesus for themselves. They can see something so special in Jesus that they want their dearest relatives and friends to have that same experience.

Let’s look more closely at Philip and Nathanael in today’s reading.

Philip becomes one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. One commentator suspects that Philip might have appeared insignificant, even a little out of his depth, but Jesus changes all that. Jesus finds him out (verse 43) and calls him to follow him. Philip might not be the same Philip as the evangelist who appears in the book of Acts, but he is certainly an evangelist in this account. Immediately Philip goes to find Nathanael. He says ‘we have found the one Moses wrote about in the

Law and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’

He’s found, or been found by, God become flesh who is reaching out to his people in a new way, through a personal relationship with Jesus. Philip realizes that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, and more besides.

But Nathanael seems to be underwhelmed! Hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, he sneers rather scathingly ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’

Philip isn’t put off but says ‘Come and see’.

Jesus recognises in Nathanael a true Israelite. He knows all about him before meeting him. And this impresses Nathanael – although he’s not impressed that Jesus hails from an insignificant village like Nazareth! How can Jesus know so much about him just by seeing him under the fig tree? Well, John’s gospel is full of imagery and the fig tree is a symbol of rabbinic literature, an indication of one who studies the Torah, the holy scriptures of the Jews.

So impressed is Nathanael that he responds by naming Jesus ‘the Son of God’ and ‘the king of Israel’.

Jesus answers by telling Nathanael that he will see even greater things. In fact he will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

This picture of heaven opened and angels ascending and descending is an allusion to Jacob’s ladder in Genesis chapter 28. Jacob was running away from his brother Esau because of the deceit he’d practised in stealing away Esau’s birthright. He’d camped at Bethel (which means ‘God’s house’) and had fallen asleep. Whilst sleeping he’d seen a vision of a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels

ascending and descending on it. There was a clear link between earth and heaven.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is talking about heaven being opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on him, the Son of Man. No ladder is needed between earth and heaven, not even the Temple (God's house so beloved of the Jews) is needed for true worship. Jesus is clearly saying that he's the way. He is the Word made flesh. God has come to earth to be with his people in Jesus.

And Jesus has recognised in Nathanael 'a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false' (verse 47) – unlike the false Jacob. And yet even in Jacob's falseness, God used and blessed him. How much more would he use and bless Nathanael, a man in whom there is nothing false. Like Jacob, we can all be false at times too. Take heart that God knows us, warts and all, and in his generosity and grace still wants to bless us.

Perhaps we're not at all like Jacob – more like Philip. Maybe we're a bit shy, possibly even out of our depth. We might not be prominent people. But Philip's encounter with Jesus, the living God, the Word made flesh, immediately leads him to bring his friend to Jesus.

What about Nathanael? A follower of God's ways. Straightforward and lacking in deceit. Perhaps a little cynical! One who knew his scriptures well and who would have been faithful in worship? Perhaps we can see something of Nathanael in us as we worship God faithfully and are open to his call on our lives as we study the scriptures. Nathanael's encounter with Jesus, the living God, the Word made flesh, changed him to see that Jesus was the true way. Maybe today is our opportunity to encounter Jesus in a new way and reach out to others more effectively as a consequence.

The living God comes to us in Jesus. He reaches out to us in the way he reached out to Philip and Nathanael, and in the way he reached out

to the deceitful Jacob and to the innocent young Samuel. And thinking of Samuel isn't it amazing to realise that God calls us at any age – no-one is too young or too old to enter into a relationship with God. God takes the initiative and calls us into a new relationship through Jesus. Will we accept that invitation? If we've already entered that new relationship with Jesus, will we allow him to continue to transform us and enable us to call others to 'Come and see'?

As we journey into this new year, may our eyes and hearts be open to following Jesus and reaching out in his love to other people. Amen.