

17th January –Second Sunday of Epiphany White

John 1. 43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. 45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "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."

46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

50 Jesus said, "You believe[a] because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." 51 He then added, "Very truly I tell you,[b] you[c] will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on'[d] the Son of Man."

The normal way of things in Judaism was that children aged 5 (and lets be honest - it was the boys only in Jesus day) would go to a kind of Sunday school and learn the basic law and 10 commandments - by heart of course, and without books or paper or iPad or laptops. They would learn the Torah.

At 10 the best of them would start learning the Mishnah - which is the oral tradition of how those laws are interpreted. At 15, the best of the best would apply to learn the talmud - which is a further interpretation of the law and Mishnah. Finally, those who were good enough, and had the wherewithal to support themselves, could apply to sit under a rabbi to learn their way - that is their rule of life, and was called the yoke of the rabbi - I kid you not.

So, here is Philip, hanging round John the baptist - with Simon Peter and Andrew. Its fascinating that in the other gospels their call by Jesus seems out of the blue - like he's walking past them by the lake and says - oi, you! Follow me! Which is not what would have happened, I'm sure, but in John's gospel, these people are seen as already very interested in living a different way, finding a new faith and hope in Israel.

And last week, or the previous few verses - John has just pointed to Jesus and said - he's the Lamb of God - this is the one - follow him! And so Andrew goes, and then takes Simon Peter, and today ... what happens is not that Philip comes and applies to Jesus to take his yoke, but Jesus finds him!

This is the crazy thing about being a disciple of Christ, this rabbi Jesus does not accept applications, he invites these guys - not the best of the best, not with the resources (they have to have women to pay for the mission) but Jesus chooses them - he sees something in them.

And so he finds Philip, and because of what John the Baptist said - the commentaries will talk about the witness or testimony of John - that witness is like a spark to ignite the flame of faith. Throughout Johns' gospel there are witnesses who tell people about Jesus, and through their telling, their witness, people believe.

And the first thing Philip does is go and find a friend, and witnesses to him! This is the

Messiah! And for those of you like continuity between your gospels - John adds the lines - from Nazareth, son of Joseph - thereby telling the nativity in 5 words!

And what is Nathaniel's response? Nazareth? Pah!

Which is not very encouraging - but its probably the kind of response many of us have had when people find out we're Christians or if ever dare tell them about Jesus. Oh him? I don't want to know..

But this response about Nazareth is odd - there's nothing in the Bible to say that Nazareth is a bad place - its not like Sodom and Gomorrah, there's nothing in archaeology to suggest it was a jungly lawless town. In fact, that's the point - there's nothing written about it anywhere, pre Jesus. Its not even worth mentioning in the guide book. It doesn't even rate "mostly harmless" in the Hitch hikers guide. And for Nathaniel, he feels the Messiah would be bound to come from somewhere famous, like King David's town at least. Yet here is John's gospel doing his other bit of the nativity - the born in a stable an unexpected way - here is John saying Jesus has come from nowhere - without any privileges or special honours.

And Philip's response to Nathaniel's dismissal? - "come and see for yourself". Like the woman at the well - come and see a man who told me everything about me - and we should say the same to those we dare to witness to. Come along to church or to this group, and find Jesus for yourself.

So Nathaniel comes, and Jesus says an odd thing - here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

So it could be that he sees he's a very orthodox and upright Jewish man. Or is he starting a play on words that will hint about Jacob's ladder? You see Jacob - the one with Esau and the 4 wives and the goats and all that - Jacob means - deceiver, and after he'd wrestled with God, his name became Israel.

But maybe there was a nickname or something else going on, because clearly Nathaniel feels like Jesus has hit the nail on the head. Yes that's me, but how do you know?

Jesus says - I saw you under the fig tree.. what does that mean?

Some commentators link in to other passages in the Bible - everyone will sit under their own vine and fig..

I think its more common than that - in hot countries, there are less trees, people sat under trees for shade. In Africa schools are often under a certain tree. Abraham meets people at the Oaks of Mamre. Buddha found enlightenment under a tree, even Isaac Newton was under a tree. I think this sitting under the tree is there to show that Nathaniel was a seeker, a student, a learner - he, like Philip and Andrew and Simon Peter - was someone trying to grow the spiritual side of his life - someone who was looking for a connection with the divine, something bigger.

So Jesus sees him - and maybe this is just literally - Jesus saw him? And Nathaniel is impressed by Jesus the prophet - who is told by his father things about other people. John says elsewhere that Jesus - knowing what was in their hearts - John has Jesus as fully human, but supernaturally informed by his father of the inside story.

And Nathaniel does this amazing reversal - Philip's witness has kindled a spark, and now, seeing Jesus, has ignited belief -

You are the son of God! That's the kind of thing we have to wait for the end of Mark's

gospel for. Its the kind of title that in the Old Testament referred to Israel the nation - out of Egypt I called my son - yet Jesus is the new Israel. And the old testament calls King David - God's son - and Jesus is in David's line and is David's successor.

And also King of Israel - a much more political term, a real kingdom, the one who will liberate.

And what is interesting is that there has been a gradual dawning of understanding among Philip and Nathaniel - could it be the Messiah, the one Moses talked about - and now Son of God - and yet I don't think they mean the same thing as Jesus meant by these titles. They believe, but don't understand.

And Jesus says the same - so you believe because I told you... just wait until you see.. seeing is believing in John's gospel - in Chapter 8 he'll say, if you don't believe because of this, then believe because of the miracles. These things are signs pointing to who I am.

You will see heaven opened. - a backwards reference to the baptism and the dove descending - heaven opened and the angels come and going - on Jacob's ladder - you of no deceit - only it won't be Jacob in the story - it will be me! I will be the gate, the bridge, the ladder, between earth and heaven. I will take things divine and make them known, heavenly blessings and healing I will bring. And all earthly concerns and flesh I will take into heaven - all your prayers, your concerns your worries - I will carry up to heaven. Its me! Jesus says. This relationship with God - its me!

And remember - this is not what they applied for, what they earned - it was as much a shock or surprise to them as it would be to you, queuing in the rain outside Wimbledon and someone tapping you on the shoulder and saying - come this way - and finding yourself in the royal box on centre court.

Suddenly Philip and Nathaniel have a rabbi - they have a yoke! And they don't understand, but they believe and will follow. Nathaniel is mentioned at the post resurrection Galilee breakfast in Chapter 21, Philip goes on to preach the gospel in Phrygia and is martyred in Hierapolis according to tradition. They remain faithful to the end. They prove worthy of the trust Jesus put in them when he called them. He who is faithful will do it.

And what about us? Jesus can see us - know us - like he knew Philip and could see him. Jesus calls us too - he invites us to come and see, to take his yoke, no matter what we think of ourselves - all are called, he sees the good in you, the strength in you, the possibilities in you - and with his help, with his holy spirit, he can help us each day to follow him.

And what about our witness - sometimes there are chances, opportunities, sometimes it feels like we have to wait, or let our actions speak.. and many times people will just go - Nazareth pah! Or dismiss our Lord. But we mustn't give up or stop trying. We must follow our lord, our king - the one who is the son of God. Jesus has opened the kingdom of heaven, and calls us to be his friends.

Because as Simon Peter says when some are fading - you have the words of eternal life - to whom else would we go?