

Nathanael

Reading: John 1: 43 – end

Today we are looking at Nathanael who we heard about earlier in our gospel reading. Now Nathanael comes from Cana in Galilee. And if that sounds familiar – yes, it's the place where Jesus turned water into wine. He was one of Jesus' early disciples and a friend of one of the other early disciples, my namesake Philip. Nathanael is also known elsewhere in the Gospels as Bartholomew, at least that's the view of most commentators

And so how does Nathanael come into the story of Jesus. Well first I'd like to go back a bit to John the Baptist. John is baptising in the River Jordan with two of his disciples. And as Jesus is in the vicinity and passing by John points him out to them and says "Look – there's the Lamb of God." And so encouraged by John, his two disciples leave him and begin to follow Jesus. We know one of the two is Andrew and we believe the other one is the author of John's gospel.

And so after spending some time with Jesus the first thing that Andrew does is to go and tell his brother Simon all about it and he too decides to follow Jesus. Jesus then moves on to Galilee, up in the North and calls Philip who is from the same village as Andrew and Simon. Philip then goes on to find his friend, Nathanael and tells him about Jesus. And what we have here is a wonderful illustration of the most fruitful method of growing the Church. There's no conference; commission or committee or teaching course on how to evangelise in ten easy steps or anything like that. No - just one person finds Jesus and then goes and finds someone else and tells them about Jesus. And that's evangelism at its best, one person telling another about Jesus.

"We've found the Messiah," Philip tells Nathanael "You know the one Moses and the Prophets spoke about and said would come. He's Jesus of Nazareth." "Nazareth!" exclaims Nathanael. "You've got to be kidding. Can anything good come out of there?" It seems, that in the time of Jesus the people of Nazareth were not particularly liked and as a place it seems to have been held in contempt by many of those living around and about.

And I think there's something more going on here in what Nathanael says, which is not immediately apparent on a casual reading of the text. You know, I can imagine Nathanael thinking "Nazareth – that can't be right, that's not what my bible says. –surely the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem," but then Philip wasn't to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

But he doesn't get side-tracked into debating the issue, he simply says "come and see – come and see for yourself." And with that he takes his friend along to meet Jesus. And as Jesus looks at Nathanael he sees with insight something very special about him. Nothing escapes Jesus and he sees deep into Nathanael's heart – just as he does into ours. And he says of Nathanael "this is a man of integrity, honest and open and there's no deceitfulness in him at all. He's a true Israelite."

And Nathanael says to Jesus. "How do you know me? Did Philip tell you about me before he told me about you?" And Jesus says "I was watching you when you were sitting all alone under that fig tree."

And again, it's not always apparent on a casual reading, but I think there are some clues here in the text that give us some insight into Nathanael's character. And there seems to be a suggestion here that Nathanael is someone who loves to get alone by himself – faraway from everyone else and just sit quietly and meditate.

I think there's another clue in the text as well, and that is Nathanael loved to meditate on Scripture which in his case would have been the Hebrew Bible which, of course, is our Old Testament. And I think there is a strong suggestion in the text that Nathanael had been meditating on the story of Jacob but I will come to that later. But before that, for us as followers of Jesus today I think the story of Nathanael says something to us of the importance of Christian reflection and meditation and in particular biblical meditation. And perhaps at this point I could say a few words about that.

You know, there's something special about spending time alone in God's presence and reflecting on his Word. And it's important if we are to grow and mature in our Christian life. Just as we need food and drink to nourish our physical lives we need spiritual food to nourish our spiritual lives. Something that Jesus said is this 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.' It's the art of being still before God, and allowing his Spirit to speak to us through the Scriptures. And it's as we reflect over them slowly and carefully and allow them sink from our heads to our hearts that they become part of who we are. In the words of St Benedict, it's about cultivating the habit of hearing the words of the Bible 'with the ears of our hearts.' Actually they are the opening words of his famous 'Rule.'

One of my favourite devotional writers is the Quaker theologian, Richard Foster and he says this: - 'Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word.' He goes on to say 'It is that simple.'

And so what about Nathanael. Well if you lived in the Middle East in the time of Jesus and wanted to find somewhere quiet and peaceful to think and pray you'd go and find some shade under a fig tree far away from all the hustle and bustle of daily life, in fact, if you lived there, you'd probably do the same today. My guess is that this is exactly what Nathanael was doing when Jesus saw him under the fig tree.

And I think this has something to say to us too – finding a favourite place to pray and to meditate on the Scriptures. And for me these two things go together – prayer and meditation. On the one hand, it is us speaking to God in prayer – and on the other, allowing God to speak to us through his Word or through that gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit. Now we may not have a fig tree around to sit under but we can find an equivalent - our own special place to get away from all the distractions that are going on all around us.

And didn't the ancient Celtic saints often talk about 'thin places' at the boundary between heaven and earth – those sacred spaces where you could meet with God. And we can have our 'thin' places too – our own sacred space where we can spend time in God's presence away from all other disruptions. It may be a particular chair in our house, it may be a special bench in the countryside or whatever. Let me quote from Richard Foster again. He says this:

'I urge you to find a place of focus – a loft, a garden, a spare room, an attic, even a designated chair – somewhere away from the routine of life, out of the path of distractions. Allow this spot to become a sacred "tent of meeting."'

And if we are to grow and mature in our faith we need these times of being away from all distractions and just to spend time alone with God. Doesn't the Psalmist say: 'Be still and know that I am God.' And if I can quote from Richard Foster yet again he says: 'what happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart.'

And it reminds me very much of the chorus of a hymn we used to sing many, many years ago (at least where I came from we did). ‘He lives, He lives – Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me along life’s narrow way. You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart.’

And for me - it’s knowing that sense of Christ’s abiding presence deep within. And I can say from personal experience that when you have an encounter with the Lord Jesus and you commit your life to him, the Holy Spirit does a deep work within you which is permanent. You just know that Jesus is alive and that it’s real.

And so let’s go back to Nathanael again. When Jesus saw him under the fig tree, Nathanael may well have been reflecting on the Old Testament the story of Jacob and how God speaks to him in a dream. A dream in which he sees a stairway reaching to heaven and the angels of God were going up and down that stairway. When he wakes up his immediate reaction is “Wow – God is truly in this place and I didn’t even realise it.”

I can imagine Nathanael puzzling over that story. “Why does God give such a man like Jacob, a liar, a cheat and a deceiver an experience like that?” Nathanael, of course, is very different to Jacob in character, in fact entirely the opposite ‘a genuine son of Israel – a man of complete integrity,’ is how Jesus describes him. Although we do know that later Jacob has his own dramatic encounter with God and it changes him completely.

And at this point in the story; again there’s probably more happening than is apparent than on the face of the text - but what Jesus says to Nathanael clearly touches him at some deep level. There’s obviously something there which Jesus sees and nobody else does and which Nathanael understands. And it’s something which causes him to quickly move from being sceptical to making a profession of faith. “You love that story of Jacob don’t you Nathanael.” I can hear Jesus saying. “Trust me Nathanael you’ve seen nothing yet – stay with me and you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

And you can see what Jesus is saying here - not just to Nathanael but to us as well “That stairway that Jacob saw in his dream is pointing to me. I am that link between heaven and earth. It’s in me that heaven and earth meet” says Jesus. And doesn’t he also say “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

And as I finish maybe like Nathanael, the Lord is saying to us that we will see greater (or more) things than we see now - but then we often miss them because there are so many other things clamouring for our attention. I’d like to think the story of Nathanael will encourage us to spend more time alone in God’s presence, reflecting on his word and listening to what he might be speaking into the quietness of our hearts. Amen.

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