

## Epiphany 2 – 15th January 2012 – Wesley Uniting

Theme: 'The calling of the early disciples'

Text: John 1:46b 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

### Introduction

The rhetorical question that Nathanael posed to the enthusiastic Philip reflects both an important literary and theological motif in the Fourth Gospel. John's Gospel presents most of Jesus' contemporaries making the same mistake as did Nathanael in appraising Jesus and his message. They assumed that Jesus' origins could explain who he was. Nathanael's scepticism about the claims made for Jesus by his first followers allowed Jesus to suggest to Nathanael that his first impressions were seriously flawed.

A similar motif appears in the reading from Samuel (1 Sam 3:1-10). There the young Samuel first mistook the voice of the Lord for that of Eli, who then helped Samuel realize who was calling him. Even when confronted by the Divine, it is possible for people to be oblivious to God's presence in their lives.

### Background

Nazareth was a village of 200-400 people. Like several other villages in the area, it was economically dependent on the city of Sepphoris, which was the capital of Galilee in the first years of the reign of Herod Antipas as tetrarch. The Hebrew Scriptures never mention Nazareth, much less associate it with messianic expectations. Nazareth then, lent no special status to its inhabitants, so when Philip told Nathanael that Jesus was the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Nathanael concluded that Philip had to be mistaken, since Jesus was the 'son of Joseph from Nazareth'. In Nathanael's view, Jesus could be nothing more than a simple Jew from an insignificant village in Galilee. The Messiah would certainly be of more prominent parentage and come from a more significant town.

Some things don't change do they!! We often judge people by their family or by where they live. Sometimes we judge people by their job or lack of work. Sometimes we judge people by first impressions instead of making opportunity to get to know them better. We can be as judgemental as was Nathanael initially.

## Middle

What happens when Nathanael encounters Jesus? There is a huge change. I believe that we have a very abridged version of their meeting as it seems relatively unremarkable except that somehow Nathanael's attitude towards Jesus is transformed and he comes out with an incredible faith statement: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of

Israel.' John 1:49

The only clue to at least part of this transformation, we could well use the word 'conversion', is that Jesus' foreknowledge of him was what convinced Nathanael as to Jesus' divinity. Jesus says in John 1:48b 'I saw you while you were still under

the fig tree before Philip called you.'

In hot weather, the shade of fig trees became a favourite place for study and prayer. But even this seems a quite unremarkable observance by Jesus. Yet Nathanael is a changed individual and follows Jesus. Certainly meeting Jesus in person also helped convince Nathanael that he was in the presence of an extraordinary individual although this is not specifically recorded.

In John 1:51-2 Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see far more amazing things than what he has already experienced. There is the allusion to Jacob's ladder, a dream that Jacob had in Genesis 28:10-19, where Jacob recognized that he was in the presence of God. Jesus uses this Hebrew imagery to say that those who are part of his earthly ministry will see amazing things from God and there will be testimony given from heaven that Jesus is the promised of God. For us today this all seems a little strange, but for the Hebrew listeners they understood this word picture which re-inforces the faith statement of Nathanael, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you

are the King of Israel'.

Philip, the disciple who introduced Nathanael to Jesus, bears a Greek name and comes from Bethsaida, a predominately Greek town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is here that Jesus heals the blind man in Mark 8 and also is the vicinity of the feeding of the five thousand in Luke 9. Yet it is also an area where people failed generally to respond positively to Jesus' ministry so Matthew 11:21 and Luke 10:13 tell us.

Hence it is the place of the remarkable transformation of Nathanael at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, yet for others they simply did not understand who Jesus really was.

What can we take from this passage for ourselves?

1. I love the enthusiasm of Philip's faith. It is not purely personal but something to share with his friends. He goes off and tells his friend Nathanael about Jesus. The infectiousness of new faith in Jesus is quite wonderful. Some of 'the gloss' is lost by we who have been Christians for a long time. We can learn anew from those who are young and enthusiastic in their faith.
2. We are called not to be judgemental about others due to status, birth, background, job etc because we may miss what God is wanting us to hear.
3. We are called to introduce others to the Jesus we love, even if they are a little unsure of all this Christian stuff. God certainly can and does work in marvellous and mysterious ways which we do not always understand. I have experienced this in my own life. I quite unexpectedly became a Christian through discussions with friends, through seeking purpose in my own life and through hanging out on the fringes of the church. I resonate with Jesus' words to Nathanael: "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." For me, it was as if Jesus was there before I even realised it and through others he encouraged me to 'follow'.

I can't fully explain it – it just happened.

4. Through Christ, God has amazing plans for us and it is up to us whether we accept to follow or not and find fulfilment in our God given lives. Certainly, I would never have done half the things that ministry has brought to me if I hadn't accepted to follow Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. Some of those things have been an incredible challenge, but what an adventure I've had for forty years since accepting the transformation of meeting Jesus.

As we begin 2012 may we be strengthened in our faith and allow Jesus to lead us in his ways. Amen.