



Sermon: - 14th January 2018

Come and see...

Psalm 139:1-6,13-18; John 1: 43-51

Well, that's it, Christmas is over for another year. As well as being back on the diet, possibly vowing to have a dry January, wondering how on earth the bank balance is going to recover, we can also breathe a sigh of relief as we don't have to go through the tortured process of trying to decide what the perfect gift might be for our friends and our families. It's that moment in the panic of Christmas Eve shopping when you're trying to decide whether so-and-so would like this or that, that maybe you also begin to wonder how well you actually know your friends or your family. My family and I have discovered the Amazon wish list which is pretty handy as we can be sure that we're getting something that is really wanted, but this is a serious question, how well would you say you know your friends?

Today's gospel reading deals with the calling of Philip and one of the first acts of evangelism is described here, when Philip brings Nathanael to Jesus. Earlier in the chapter we see Jesus calling Andrew, who of course brings his brother Peter, but for some reason the readings for today begin with Philip and Nathanael. Perhaps it's because when Jesus calls Nathanael, we hear, for the very first time in the Gospels, that famous invitation, which Jesus will go on to use time and time again, "follow me!" And of course, Philip does decide to follow Jesus, but he also goes to find Nathanael, and gives that second very famous invitation, "come and see!"

And if you recall the story of Andrew and Peter, we know that Peter accepted Andrew's invitation with enthusiasm. But not Nathanael! He is a much more cynical character, and much less easy to persuade. Which makes me wonder why Philip first went to Nathanael, rather than picking someone who might have been more receptive to the message. If Nathanael was his friend, as it seems he was, you think Philip would have known better – Nathanael's the cynic, he won't be interested! Yet Philip decides that Nathanael is the person to whom he is going to take this message. And of course, Nathanael reacts just as might have been anticipated, as a cynic with street cred to defend! "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It seems that Nazareth was the very last place from which Nathanael would have expected the Messiah to come. Why does Nazareth have such a bad press, we might wonder. It might have been because Nazareth was such a tiny little village, with no more than a hundred and fifty inhabitants. Or it might have been

because Nazareth was very close to Sepphoris which was an administrative centre for the unpopular government of the time, and was thought, therefore, to be under the control of the government. That might also explain why Jesus was rejected in Nazareth later in his ministry, when he was making himself so unpopular with the religious leaders of the day.

However, in spite of Nathanael's negativity towards Nazareth, once he meets Jesus, all his doubts melt away and he acknowledges that this person, even although he comes from Nazareth, is in fact the Messiah. And interestingly, Jesus, instead of being irritated by or even resenting Nathanael's doubts, reacts positively! "Here is true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false!" Nathanael's honesty was, for Jesus, a positive thing, and as Jesus responded to that honesty Nathanael was won over and became a disciple.

There are a couple things that interest me in this little encounter. The first is this sense of knowing another person. Philip knew Nathanael, knew his cynicism, and yet still took to him the invitation, "come and see!" Jesus also knew Nathanael, and knew just the right thing to say to him in order to convince him that he was indeed the Messiah. I asked at the beginning how well we know our friends and family.

Perhaps what matters more is how well God knows them. We know that God knows us, Psalm 139 tells us so very beautifully that God knows us through and through. He has counted every hair on our heads. He knit us together in our mother's womb. He knows us, and he cares for us. But I think we can assume that he also knows our friends and our families. He knows all the people who we encounter day by day. He understands them and knows how they might react to that invitation, "come and see", just as he knew how Nathanael would react.

Those first disciples, the first people that Jesus called, were captivated by Jesus. They knew immediately that something special was happening. They had an epiphany. We are still in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany, revelation, new insight. Christmas is about the revelation of God in Jesus. The Shepherd's had an epiphany, the wise men had an epiphany, Andrew and Philip had an epiphany, and today, we read of Nathanael's epiphany. And this brings me to the second thing that interests me about this story today. The fact that Nathanael's epiphany took him by surprise.

He was not expecting that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. And that makes me wonder about where we look for Jesus, where we expect to find him, and whether, having found him, we can help others find him. There is a saying doing the rounds today, "people haven't given up on

God, they've just given up on finding him in the church!" That's terribly sad, and I also think that it's unfair. Just as Nathanael discovered God unexpectedly in Nazareth, I think people can still discover God in the church, perhaps unexpectedly! However, the truth is that people have given up on the church to a large extent. In all the talk about mission today our church leaders keep saying, "it's not about numbers", but it is about numbers. It is vitally important that we take the good news of the gospel out of these four walls into the community. But it is equally important that we build up our numbers here within these four walls. After all, if there is no one in here, there will be no one to take the good news out there. But I think the message of the Bible passages for us today is, how can we help people find God, in the church or out of it!

We can say to people, "come and see!" But I wonder if there are other ways that we can help people to discover God in this world today? How can those who have no time for God hear him speak? How will those who are apparently indifferent to the Gospel recognise our Lord? How will those who may be hostile to faith be convinced to recognise Jesus and who he is? What can we do to enable others to have this epiphany! Perhaps all that is asked of us is that we live our lives in a way that gives people a clue as to where they might find God.

Billy Graham had a saying which sums it up well. He said: "We are the Bibles the world is reading; we are the creeds the world is needing; we are the sermons the world is heeding." We can say, "come and see" in words, but we can also say, "come and see" in our actions!

How will people find Jesus? People will see – or fail to see – Jesus, because of us. For it is in and through us that the person of Jesus is revealed to the world; in and through us that the voice of God speaks to the world; in and through us that the love of God is revealed to the world.

Or, sadly, perhaps sometimes in and through us that Jesus is hidden, God's voice silenced, and his love obscured...

Does the world out there recognise Jesus, God's Son, in us; in our actions and attitudes, our lifestyle and loving, our service and sacrifice, our care for the poor and our concern for the needy, our priorities and preoccupations? Do we reveal, in and through these, the person of Jesus, God's Son? Do people see in us and our attitudes and actions, Jesus the Servant Lord? Do they hear from us Jesus, the Word of God?

Jesus said, 'follow me' and as we hear that voice and heed that call and follow, truly follow, whatever the cost and wherever he leads... When we hear him call in the face of and the midst of

the church's present challenge, will we be ready to be faithful to that call and follow and seek others to join us on the journey as Andrew found Simon Peter and Philip found Nathanael saying 'Come and see'.

These first disciples went out, found their families and friends and said, "*Come and see*". I suggested last week that if we came to church expecting an epiphany we might just get one. If we come expecting to meet Jesus, then will he not reveal himself to us? But I wonder too, if we can't, like Philip, be the source of an epiphany for someone else! If we were to say to a friend, or a family member, "come and see", what could happen? What might the result be? What revelation might they find? What surprise might they discover? Perhaps they might even find God in the church! And if we have had this epiphany, and if it has made a difference to us, and if it truly is good news, for us and for the world, why would we want to keep it to ourselves!

Jesus has called us to follow him. We have responded to that call. Let's now take that out of these walls into the community, and say to others, "*come and see!*"