**1 Sam 3.1-10
John 1.43-51
3rd January 2021

 Nathanael’s Epiphany**

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Do you ever wonder how people will remember us? Will they talk of our good points or just recall our grumpy moments? It’s probably a somewhat futile exercise for us to spend too long over anyway!

What can we say about Nathanael? Well, not very much in that so little is written about him in the gospel. He was a follower of Jesus and a friend of Philip’s, yet next to nothing is known about either of them, indeed it’s only in John’s writings that they are mentioned at all.

One bible commentator I read is obviously underwhelmed, at least initially, by Nathanael and especially his prejudice against Nazareth and describes him as a person *not predisposed to effervescence*.

Maybe at first Nathanael only saw the negative about Jesus and comes across as deeply suspicious. Yet Philip did a great job in coaxing him along and sharing his own enthusiasm with him.

What we know is this: these two friends talk about faith under a fig tree with Philip urging Nathanael to *come and see.* That’s an invitation full of integrity and perhaps it’s the only one any of us can truly give. You can’t preach at a friend, but you can share your own life and faith experience with them as a commendation; and that’s what Philip seems to have done, rather successfully, in today’s passage.

As a result, something changes in Nathanael; something snaps into focus.

After talking it through he begins thinking that actually, just maybe, something good could come out of Nazareth and so he starts to talk of this Jesus as *rabbis, Son of God and King of Israel.*It’s a personal change of heart that’s up there with Paul’s on the Road to Damascus.

We are in the season of the year the Church calls Epiphany. It begins with the visit of the magi and characterises the opening weeks of any New Year. An epiphany is similar to a eureka moment when a lightbulb seems to turn on and we begin to see a new truth or an old one differently. It’s a moment of discovery and in that moment we can become forever changed.

Jesus realises Nathanael has had such a moment, a personal epiphany because as he approaches him he doesn’t describe him as the master of suspicion or negativity that he once was, instead Jesus encounters the changed Nathanael and calls him a *true Israelite, worthy of the name in whom there is nothing false.*

Well, our task this morning is to reflect on this idea of a personal epiphany and ask the question if they can still happen today, maybe even in our lives?

Minister: Lord God – our prayer is that the written word
 will point us to Christ, the Living Word.
**All: So in his name we pray
 and for his voice we listen. Amen.**We all come to faith in different ways.

In my church youth group we’d hold occasional Testimony evenings when we’d tell our stories. I always rather enjoyed the fact that my testimony began differently to my friends. Most of their stories began with the words *I grew up in a Christian home.* Indeed, I knew most of their parents because they were the deacons or leaders at my church. I think my home had Christian values but non church going parents. So, my testimony never started like their’s and it felt good to be a little different and say I started attending church because a friend invited me.

Nathanael’s journey to faith snaps into focus. It’s not so much a gradual shift, more a dramatic moment.

There’s an amusing line in the novel *Cold Comfort Farm* that describes the eccentricities of the wonderful Aunt Ada Doom as the result of what she saw one day in the woodshed. We are never told what it was, but it changed her forever!

Well, something of a spiritual nature seems to have happened to Nathanael as he sat with Philip, deep in discussion, under the fig tree. Once again, we don’t really know what went on yet, from that moment he too was never the same again. He emerges now as a believer in, and supporter of, Jesus of Nazareth.

This is Nathanael ‘mark two’. The original one was full of suspicion and negativity. His antipathy towards Jesus seemed to rest on prejudice; prejudice based on nothing more than geography. Nathanael simply couldn’t believe that any good thing might ever come out of Nazareth.

I was once a guest at a formal dinner in London and attended, as requested, wearing my clerical collar. The unknown, well spoken stranger opposite me was obviously initially pleased that he had been placed at our table. That all changed when he asked me what parish I came from. *Oh,* I said, *I’m not Anglican but Baptist.* Well, that seemed to upset him. *Shame* he said, looked away and he didn’t utter another word to me for the rest of the meal!

Any prejudice, and I’ve got as many as the next person, doesn’t have to make sense to become a strong defining, and even destructive force in our lives.

For Nathanael it was Nazareth. It was utterly beyond him, as a resident in the more well to do town of Bethsaida, that God’s messenger, Jesus, should come from somewhere like Nazareth.

I was intrigued to hear a comment about Asquith, the early 20th century Liberal British Prime Minister on a Radio 4 programme the other day. Although Asquith’s government was one of reform, introducing social measures like the Old Age Pension, he was against the Votes for Women campaign. In 1909 Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the most famous Suffragettes of her day, asked to see the Prime Minister and refused to leave Parliament Green until he granted her an interview. She waited outside for two days, refusing to eat, until grudgingly Asquith agreed to see her.

He was prejudiced against her cause, and later admitted that. Indeed, he said he’d never ever met anyone like Emmeline Pankhurst in his life, before that day. Then in she comes, tired and hungry, yet moderate, reasonable and articulate in all she said.

It was a moment that changed Asquith. His prejudice, based on misunderstanding, melted away because he encountered Emmeline Pankhurst who he felt he could understand.

One commentator says of Nathanael that *he fell prey to the Offence of the Incarnation.* That is, until now he was suspicious of Jesus and negative about Nazareth. But then he met him. He met this Jesus. And it was, for him, a eureka moment, a spiritual epiphany.

Maybe there’s an atmosphere around at the moment that, ironically, Church is the last place anyone would meet God. There is a certain prejudice, perhaps sometimes for good reason, against the Church. People are often keen to describe themselves as spiritual yet not religious.

Well, I believe God is still to be found in our churches, even though it's clear that us members don’t always appreciated how much we can smother the notion of God with a culture that isn’t intrinsically grounded in God.

Isn’t the truth that God can be found anywhere? It’s often prejudice that stops him being recognised either in The Church or abroad in The World.

It’s intriguing that Jesus commends the changed Nathanael as a person in whom *there is nothing false.*I wonder what’s behind that phrase?

Maybe its our prejudices that stop us seeing the truth? We don’t truly grasp reality when we coat it too thickly with our preconceptions.

There is a spiritual exercise from the Jesuit tradition that includes something called the Examen Prayer. It’s the idea that come the end of the day we should spend some moments critically reflecting on our actions and those of others. The Examen Prayer is an antidote to rushing through the day and going to bed frustrated. Instead, it prompts a second look at our motives or the intentions of others. The Jesuits called it a spiritual exercise because that way of thinking, praying and reflecting takes a bit of work, yet in the process we can reassess our prejudices rather than becoming their victims.

In Nathanael, says Jesus, there was *nothing false.* Under that fig tree, maybe, he’d taken stock of his life with Philip; he’d put the work in and now saw things differently.

Whether under a fig tree or saying the Examen Prayer we can all have moments of epiphany when we are changed.

Whenever we drive down to Southampton to see my brother I often, on the way home, drive along the A27 to join the motorway one junction further on than is strictly necessary. That’s because this bit of road, from Locks Heath to Southampton was the one I travelled on for four years whilst working for the Midland Bank. Towards the end of my time there I’d started lay preaching and my home church minister was suggesting I applied for ordination training. It was a big decision to make and I often did my thinking about it driving to work. Halfway to Southampton there’s a dip in the road – it’s still there! One morning, as I was thinking and praying, driving my Hillman Hunter, I went down that hill not sure about ordination, and came up it convinced I should apply. Today, as we drive along the A27, someone in the car will say – *is this THE hill Dad?!* Perhaps it was my fig tree moment?

In today’s reading from the Jewish scriptures Samuel has his moment of encounter, his call. It didn’t come from his mentor Eli but direct from God.

Where will we meet God this year. Sometimes these moments will come in unexpected places and often they might even be unsought. Yet, however they come we are grateful for them. Those whispers from God that change us and push us on.

Will we meet God this year in the patience needed to await vaccination? The challenge needed to step up a gear and re-emerge into community after spending so long in isolation? The commitment we might show to a new ecological understanding or in the joy of once more coming together for worship and fellowship. Or maybe it will be none of these things. Because everyone’s epiphany moments are part of our personal faith journey.

May we, with Nathanael and Samuel, know the reality of encountering God and being changed from the inside out.

In the name of the One who still meets us and calls us by name.
Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 8th January 2021*