

Philip and Nathaniel – January 2021 – Epiphany 2

Good Morning to you all on this the second Sunday of Epiphany a church season that invites us to be open to new discoveries...and that is going to be my conclusion to today's talk...so you can skip through to the end if you wish! Are you open to new discoveries? Do you know what it is you would want to discover – which might sound ridiculous...if we knew what we wanted to discover, surely we have discovered what it is??

But there's one thing knowing what you want, quite another experiencing it – particularly on our Spiritual journey. Today's reading concerns Philip and Nathaniel. What can we learn from their Epiphany?

*It is thought by most scholars that the person referred to here as Nathaniel is called Bartholomew in the other Gospels, Bartholomew being more of a surname – son of Tolemew – whereas Nathaniel is a given personal name.*

What this passage reveals is that Jesus describes him as a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit; another translation says "in whom there is no guile".

A true Israelite would indicate a man of genuine faith, someone practising his faith, having the hopes and expectations of his faith and doing it all honourably and righteously. We admire people from all walks of life who are being what we would hope them to be – whether a teacher or doctor or gardener or the plumber or in business. We admire people who are honest, genuine, with integrity and open-minded; people who have no deceit or guile.

But what is also clear is that Nathaniel has unconscious bias as we all do. We are all biased in all sorts of different ways and it's unconscious bias because – as the title suggests...we are not

aware we have it. Whatever our upbringing and life experience we absorb bias and it emerges from time to time.

Revd. Terry and I have become more aware of this as a topic because he attended a training session on it as part of his post-ordination training. Once you become aware that you have unconscious bias (because we all do) the Holy Spirit (or your colleagues!) can start helping you become aware of it and then it stops being unconscious and is revealed simply as a bias...and then, if you are willing, you can do something about it!

As Philip is telling Nathanael that they have found the Messiah he says...

"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."

To which Nathanael replies

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"

This good, righteous, honest, genuine, open-minded person has nevertheless a bias against people from the little rural towns in the north of the country – Nazareth in particular.

Our greatest institutions can have the same in-built bias (which I haven't time to explore) let's just say it still matters which School and University you go to!

But what this passage reveals is that Jesus doesn't hold Nathanael's bias against him. If he was going to choose disciples who had no unconscious bias, he would have failed...they all did and so do we. We do as individuals and we do as a church community. But now we know that, we can do something about it.

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This passage of scripture sets the tone for much of John's gospel and is used as a model for the spiritual life.

Nathanael comes to Jesus – in this case he is invited to "come and see" by Philip who has himself encountered Jesus.

Nathanael encounters Jesus for himself.

That encounter has a profound impact on Nathanael and sets him on a new path as a disciple.

In this instance, Jesus has a prophetically given, spiritual insight that could only come from God. He reveals that he saw Nathanael sitting under a fig tree, before Philip found him.

I would suggest to you, that while Nathanael was sitting under the fig tree, what he was thinking about, praying about and considering was deeply personal – I think it was connected to his faith and a longing for more. I have no evidence – but the reason I think this, is because of the profound impact Jesus' revelation had on Nathanael.

This wasn't some sort of spiritual trick Jesus played on Nathanael, but in revealing that he had seen him and knows him...I think it told Nathanael that his deepest desires were known and that what he was longing for was right in front of him. For me that's the only explanation that would take him from his unconscious bias against the man from Nazareth to worshipping him and saying

"Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Are you open to a new encounter with Jesus Christ in 2021? A new discovery of the depth of his love for you and that he knows you – knows you better than you know yourself?

I believe that Jesus is the answer to our deepest longings, our greatest fears, the unknown mystery that we can be to ourselves. The freedom that we long for and the life we want for ourselves and those we love...is found in Jesus Christ.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free!

Freedom from all the things that have shaped us and restricted us and that cause anxiety and fear...freedom from thinking we can never break through into the life we hope for but never seem to reach.

Jesus Christ is the answer.

And it's not about the outworking of our faith which for some is expressed in traditional worship and others in charismatic worship, for some is personal and others is about the faith community.

No – we should know by now all that is somewhat irrelevant compared to the single central discovery that the answer is found in Jesus Christ.

My invitation is that in 2021 – with everything swirling around us that can bring fear and anxiety and uncertainty...we come again to encounter Jesus Christ and allow Him to lead us into a new discovery and experience of the love of God.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson