

23rd August 2020 – Bartholomew, Apostle & Martyr – Chris’s Sermon

John 1: 43-51

In our Gospel today, we hear part of the story of the calling of the disciples. Andrew and Peter had already been called (they were the first), followed by Philip and Nathanael. (As some of you may already know, Nathanael was also known by another name – Bartholomew.) In a way, our story about the calling of Philip and Nathanael reminds us that God’s call will not always be easy or comfortable or even recognisable.

And we see this with Philip and Nathanael. Philip and Nathanael respond to their calling in different ways. But, together, they represent the struggle that we all face, as we search for God’s meaning and purpose in our lives. Philip’s response to Christ is predictable – he’s called and his response is immediate – he responds with joy and enthusiasm at the prospect of becoming a disciple. Nathanael’s story is interesting. He’s called by Philip to meet Christ. At first, he only hears the good news second hand from Philip – he hears word of a new hope and joy. To quote Isaiah, the message that had been written on Philip’s heart. But, for Nathanael it was different. For Nathanael, it was Philip’s belief – Philip’s joy. (Nathanael wasn’t there yet.)

For Nathanael, the picture was incomplete.

Philip shares his discovery. He tells him That Jesus is the one! This is a direct reference to our first reading (Deut 18) – to the prophet described as God’s chosen – the one for whom the people had waited and waited. It’s a bold claim – triumphant. Jesus is described as the one – the one that Moses wrote about in the law – the one described by the prophets – the one from Nazareth. But Nathanael is sceptical. He replies, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” He doubts Philip.

To his credit, Philip hangs in there. He invites Nathanael to come and see for himself.

And, when Nathanael does meet Jesus, his doubts are laid to rest. Jesus tells Nathanael that he was seen while sitting alone under the fig tree. He is greeted as a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit. In other words, Nathanael comes to understand that he was known by Jesus before he was aware of it. On a broader scale, he was known by God and loved by God before he was aware of it. (this is a wonderful description of grace.)

When I consider the particulars of this story, I’m amazed by its richness and depth. Surely, this is much more than just a story about the calling of the disciples. This story has the power to speak to us – it’s the story of our calling and the grace that forms us and shapes us in ways beyond our understanding. I’m reminded of those wonderful words from Jeremiah chapter 1:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...”

I think this divine knowing applies to both of them. Jeremiah and Nathanael are both called, they both struggle with their doubts, they are both sincere and godly men – true Israelites. But, Jeremiah and Nathanael are formed for ministry in different ways - formed for ministry by the presence of a loving God who can see beyond our field of vision – a God who has the power to move us and shape us even when we are unaware of it.

As with so many of the stories that we read in scripture, I wish this one was more detailed. I’d like to know more about Nathanael (or Bartholomew) – more about his doubts and expectations (More about this true Israelite).

Our Gospel today talks about the gradual unfolding of our faith – the slow but gradual deepening of our faith. (We can all be a bit like Nathanael.) Consider the objection that Nathanael made. All who desire truth and understanding and meaning must be mindful of Nathanael’s doubt and struggle (this is the story of our doubt and struggle). We must be mindful of the prejudice that can blind us – prejudice against places, and denominations and race and gender. (There is so much prejudice in the world today. We are more likely to be judged today in relation to our clothing, income and address than we are in relation to our beliefs and values.

Like Nathanael, perhaps we too need to be reminded that God’s grace will often be found in unexpected places – it can lead us to new and unexpected places. Many people living in our world today will never share with us the blessings of life in the church. As I’ve said before, the national church life survey clearly shows us that church worship is in decline, across all the mainstream denominations. I think these numbers reflect a lack of understanding in the wider community – and perhaps some prejudice against us and our beliefs as well.

In Nathanael there was no guile. Despite his doubts, we are told that he was a good and honest man. He was of sound character, an upright and godly man (searching for God in his own way).

These are the qualities that Jesus recognized within him.

(Hopefully, these are the same qualities that God can see within us and our church, regardless of our doubts and struggles.

Some things - weak, imperfect and flawed - live within all of us (and our church), but Jesus witnessed what passed when Nathanael was sitting alone under the fig-tree. Surely, only our living God has the power to truly see us this clearly, reading the hidden hopes and dreams that are written on our hearts.

I like to think that Philip was sitting alone in prayer, reaching out to God for direction, where no human eye could see him.

In the conversation that Jesus shared with Nathanael, he was shown that our God can indeed see us.

Through Christ we commune with God (this is the truth that Nathanael discovers). We are reminded that we are fed by the Spirit of our living God at every stage of the journey - encouraged in our searching and our longing – we are reminded that the faithful on earth are united together under God, and never truly alone.

The Lord be with you.