

NATHANAEL JOHN 1:43-51

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "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."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

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

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Reflection

Nathanael had made a long journey. He was one of the faithful ones who had heard of John the Baptist in Judea, announcing the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, and travelled south from his home town of Cana in Galilee (see John 21.2). Perhaps, like many, he had been waiting, hoping and praying for the Messiah to come for his whole life. From his earliest years, when he was introduced to the study of the Law and the Prophets, he had been searching for clues to the identity of this figure. 'Someone who sat under a fig-tree' was a symbolic way of saying that they were a serious student of the scriptures. All the clues pointed to the Messiah coming to the Mount of Olives (Zech 14.4) in a blaze of glory. That's what Nathanael was looking for.

So when Philip, another who had come south from Galilee to hear John the Baptist and join the movement he had begun, broke in upon Nathanael's meditation, his

news was electrifying: 'We've found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about! There must have been a moment of dazzled delight. Yes! At Last! He's come!

And who is he? 'Jesus' – (or Joshua), a good name for a saviour; 'son of Joseph' – another good biblical name to have around; 'from Nazareth' – *"What?!!!"*

Bethlehem or Jerusalem would be fine. These were the expected places for a messiah to appear. But not Nazareth. After all, Nathanael had travelled a long way south seeking this Messiah. But Nazareth was just four or five miles over the hills from his home town of Cana. It just could not be, surely, that he had been searching all these years only to find that the one to come, the focus of all those hopes and prayers, had been growing up virtually under his nose. Could God bring a saviour from Galilee? Surely there was some mistake here?

But Philip says, 'Come and see'. All the learning in the world, the painstaking study of the scriptures, can take you in the wrong direction and make you doubt the evidence of your own eyes. Philip says in effect, 'Trust me, Nathanael. Leave your studies and meet the man himself'.

When Nathanael does so, he sees what Philip saw. Quickly he's converted to the same view – Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures. But then Jesus seems to gently chide him. Study under the fig tree is important, but it's not everything: Nathanael will see much more with his own eyes than even the prophets foretold.

Jesus said to Nathanael, 'You will see the heavens open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man'. . Nathanael would have picked up the reference straight away. Jacob, from whom the Israelites took their name, had dreamed of a ladder set up from heaven to earth at Bethel. When Jacob woke, he said 'Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it' (Gen. 28.16). Could God have been at work in Nazareth over all those years when Nathanael was growing up in Cana, and Nathanael not have known it? As he had prayed and fasted for the coming of the Kingdom, could it really have been growing under his feet all the time?

When I moved to Nuneaton in 2011, I was struck by the friendliness and community feel that the local people had. People would gladly stop and talk with you. But the other thing that struck me was that many of the locals also felt that Nuneaton didn't have much to offer. They were almost saying, 'Can anything good come out of Nuneaton?'

Well, I can tell you that Nuneaton has a lot going for it. Throughout my career in the Royal Air Force, and then in the Church of England, I have lived in many different places. Each place had its own peculiarities, but each place had a lot to offer. I think it comes down to your attitude. If your attitude is 'I am not going to enjoy living here', then you probably won't. But if your attitude is to make the best of it, then you will be happier and more content.

I wonder if you expect to find God in Nuneaton, or in your everyday life? If, like Nathanael, you only expect God to show up in Jerusalem, or maybe in a cathedral, but definitely not in Nuneaton, then you will miss out! God is here with us every day, if only we would start to look for him at work in our lives. I wonder, have you seen God at work recently?

During this pandemic, there is a danger of becoming frustrated and isolated. It really feels like the enemy is robbing us; we can't go to church; we can't have fellowship with family and friends in person; we can't go out where and when we like; and we can't even give someone a hug.

But God is with us. 'Immanuel' means 'God with us'. Jesus came to us, and now his Spirit is with us. Jesus called Philip and Nathanael and now, through his Spirit, he is calling each of us to follow him. Knowing that God is with us will help us to get through this pandemic, and whatever else life throws at us. Instead of being afraid, or despondent, and stopping to live our lives as fully as lockdown restrictions allow us, we need to change our attitude and focus on God and his love for us, and then his Spirit will raise our spirits. We will then be able to see all the good things that are happening all around us. Things like the crocus and daffodils starting to poke through the ground, with the promise that spring is on the way. Noticing how lots of people are working hard to protect us, heal us, and feed us. Recognising the community spirit that exists in and around Nuneaton, where many people care for each other, and many volunteers do all sorts of things to help others less able than themselves.

I encourage you to focus on worshiping God. Praise him and notice how that lifts your spirit. Even though we can't sing in church right now, in our own homes we can worship anytime! Maybe you will repeat the words of Jacob: 'Surely the Lord *is* in this place and I did not know it.'

God is with us. He loves you and wants to have a deeper relationship with you. He is calling you today. Will you follow him?

I pray that we will all draw closer to God and that his love will shine through us to all those we meet day by day. Amen. *Frank*