

Philip and Nathanael

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 15th January 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Evensong)

Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-3:4, John 1:43-51)

Year A, 2nd of Epiphany, second service

This evening's New Testament reading was from the Gospel of John, and is the continuation of the story we heard in this morning's Gospel reading.

John's Gospel is not like the other three Gospels in our Bible. It's not just that much of the content is different; it has a different style and emphasis. John explains why he's written his gospel in the last two verses of chapter 20:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.¹

The "signs" or miracles are part of the case that John makes for believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

But he also uses narrative devices to illustrate the variety of reactions that people have to Jesus, ranging from disbelief and rejection to belief and worship². Conversations are one way in which we learn how people respond to Jesus. Some

¹ John 20:30-31 (NRSV)

² See, for example, the reaction of the Pharisees in chapter 9 and of Thomas before and after meeting the risen Jesus in John 20:24-29

examples that spring to mind are Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3 (the famous bit about being "born again" or "born from above"). Then there's the conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria, and the conversation between the Pharisees and the blind man who had been healed with Jesus, and their interview with his parents.

This morning's Gospel reading, which came just before our reading this evening, was about John the Baptist pointing two of his disciples to Jesus, and one of them, Andrew, inviting his brother Simon to meet Jesus. Tonight we learn of the reactions of two other people – Philip and Nathanael.

I think what John, the evangelist, is doing is to offer us different examples of how people respond to the claims of Jesus and implicitly to invite us to see if we recognise ourselves in any of them. How did you come to faith? What was the role of other people? Was it straightforward for you, or did you need some convincing? Was it a gradual recognition, or a sudden realisation? Are there still questions you wrestle with? And a spin-off of all of this is that we get some tips on how to share faith with others, as we'll see in a moment.

We saw this morning how Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist were pointed to Jesus and sought him out. Then Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, and Jesus gave him a new name – Cephas in Aramaic, or Peter (Petros) in Greek.

Andrew and Peter came from the fishing village of Bethsaida in Galilee, and very soon they find themselves following Jesus along with another man from their town, Philip. The

narrator tells us that Jesus decided to go to Galilee and “found Philip”. We don’t know how that happened, and whether Jesus had bumped into Philip before, but Philip is immediately impressed with Jesus and believes that he is the Messiah. Like Andrew, Philip doesn’t keep his discovery to himself, but finds Nathanael – presumably a friend of his.

Nathanael is not someone to be swept off his feet by a new craze. He clearly has his own preconception of what a Messiah would be like, and he certainly wouldn’t be coming from Nazareth. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asks, full of scepticism.

I’m sure we all know people like that. They have their own ideas and aren’t going to be taken in by someone else’s enthusiastic faith.

So how does Philip react? He certainly doesn’t give up, but persuades Nathanael to come and meet Jesus for himself. Note that he doesn’t argue with Nathanael. There are people who are never going to become Christians by being argued into it. In fact, I think it’s very unlikely that you will convince anyone to become a Christian by just arguing, however clever and knowledgeable you are. What people will pay attention to is your own testimony. Philip has met Jesus and believed in him. He simply invites Nathanael to meet him for himself. That’s all we can do – people have to find faith for themselves.

Nathanael’s experience of meeting Jesus blows him away, because Jesus shows that he knows all about Nathanael. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit”, Jesus comments, in Nathanael’s hearing as Philip and Nathanael

approach him. In one sentence, Jesus has summed up Nathanael's character and his scepticism. Jesus knows us too – our doubts, our faith, our personality. But nothing phases him. And he tells Nathanael that he “will see greater things than these”³.

How does it feel to think that Jesus knows all about us? I suppose that it depends on whether we think Jesus will be critical of us or accept us as we are. I'd like to assure you that the latter is the case. Jesus knows everyone intimately, and he still died for each of us, and wants each of us to be his follower, and, more than that, his friend.⁴

The decisive factor in whether we become followers and friends of Jesus is not whether we are naturally sceptics or enthusiastic believers, and certainly not whether we're the kind of people that Jesus likes. Jesus came into the world to bring us back to God. The question is simply, will we “come and see” for ourselves? And will we invite others to “come and see” for themselves?

³ John 1:50

⁴ See John 15:15