

## Epiphany 2

YouTube Link: <https://youtu.be/c2pmP7IUBzE>

### John 1.43-end (NRSV)

#### Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' <sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' <sup>48</sup> Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' <sup>49</sup> Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

My text is written in John 1.46, where Philip says to Nathanael: 'Come and see.'

In the season of the Epiphany, we have noted that the major theme is God's revelation to the world through his incarnation in the person, work, teaching and example of Jesus. In our Gospel reading, which is the 'youngest' gospel of all – written much later than the rest and using them as sources - we encounter the revelation of God in Jesus to Nathanael, a follower of Jesus, but not listed in the Synoptic Gospels as one of the chosen 12. Many believe that this Nathanael is in fact Bartholomew – who *was* one of the 12 – but who also went by this different name. He certainly was close to Jesus, as he is listed with the small inner group to whom Jesus appeared after the Resurrection, at the Sea of Galilee.

Philip could not keep the good news that he had discovered to himself and rushed to find Nathanael. Notice that, while he did not argue and try to persuade Nathanael, he did know the basis of his claim from his study of the scriptures, as John explains in verse 45 where Philip clarifies: 'We have found him *about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote ...*' No one is ever persuaded into the Kingdom of God by clever arguments *alone*, in fact, sometimes this does more harm than good. Philip had something much more powerful to offer: 'Come and see'. The best evangelist is the person who both *knows and understands* the reasoning behind their faith, but who also has *encountered the risen Christ for themselves*, in their own personal experience.

Nathanael had been thinking profoundly about things because we know from contemporary sources, that vines and fig trees were symbols of places of peace and meditation. We also know that the author of the Fourth Gospel always uses the richest symbols in all his writing, to tease out the depth of meaning. When Nathanael met Jesus, he experienced the deepest sense of self understanding: here was someone who understood his dreams, who knew his prayers, who had seen into his intimate and secret longings – things he had probably never even put into words for himself – and the promise of more - the heavens opened and angels ascending and descending. This reminds us of the lovely image of the ladder between earth and heaven, referred to in Genesis, and Jacob's experience at Bethel (Genesis 28). But now Jacob's ladder is replaced by Jesus, and that, when we come to God in prayer and worship,

the avenue of angels and all the company of heaven join the earthly and the heavenly together. In the vision in the *Revelation of John*, praise breaks out as the Lamb opens the scroll and they all sing out a new song. A M Hunter explains: ‘The man Jesus is the place of revelation ... In short, Nathanael and his friends are promised that they will find in the historical Jesus, the one true mediator between God and man.’ And, as John’s Gospel progresses onwards from this point, sign after sign is offered, culminating in the Cross and finally the Resurrection of Jesus.

Have you seen the wonderful film *Educating Rita*? In the midst of trying to educate herself and facing hostility from her husband and family, Susan (her real name – she calls herself Rita as part of a game she plays with her tutor) finds herself in a pub singing along with husband and family, to some popular song in time to the juke box. Her family are delighted that they have taken her away from her studies – but she finds the whole process empty and unsatisfying and says to her mother: “Surely there must be a better song to sing!” Jesus gives us the best song to sing – but we need to ask, “Are we singing it?” Let us make sure that we ‘... sing unto the LORD a new song; for he hath done marvellous things: his right hand, and his holy arm, hath gotten him the victory. ...’ (Psalm 98:1)

In the Old Testament lesson recommended for this day, 1 Samuel 3:1-20, we find another lovely image in verse 11: ‘The Lord said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle.” In the context of this passage, the ears of Eli and his sons would tingle, because they were about to hear the words of God’s judgement. But our ears tingle, because we hear the words of God’s love for us, our families, and friends. and all those who would willingly come to be embraced by this love.

Further exploration into this passage is a wonderful source of challenge, blessing and encouragement.

### **1 Samuel 3:1-20 (NRSV)**

#### **Samuel’s Calling and Prophetic Activity**

<sup>1</sup>Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

<sup>2</sup> At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup>the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. <sup>4</sup>Then the Lord called, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ and he said, ‘Here I am!’ <sup>5</sup>and ran to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call; lie down again.’ So he went and lay down. <sup>6</sup>The Lord called again, ‘Samuel!’ Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ But he said, ‘I did not call, my son; lie down again.’ <sup>7</sup>Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup>The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, ‘Here I am, for you called me.’ Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup>Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

<sup>10</sup> Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ And Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’ <sup>11</sup>Then the Lord said to Samuel, ‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. <sup>12</sup>On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to

end. <sup>13</sup>For I have told him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. <sup>14</sup>Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever.'

<sup>15</sup> Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. <sup>16</sup>But Eli called Samuel and said, 'Samuel, my son.' He said, 'Here I am.' <sup>17</sup>Eli said, 'What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.' <sup>18</sup>So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, 'It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.'

<sup>19</sup> As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

<sup>20</sup> And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

We can see why the compilers of the Lectionary have included this reading in the Epiphany season, as this familiar story is yet another reminder of how God reveals himself personally to people in history.

It was a time, very much like our own, when '... The word of the Lord was rare ...; visions were not widespread ...' (verse 1) We have noted recently, that the same was true at the time of John the Baptist, so, when John appeared on the scene, it was like a bolt out of the blue! I find it fascinating to think that it was in this sort of spiritual wilderness, that our Lord was raised, and in which he patiently waited until he was about thirty years old, for the right time to begin his ministry. Jesus must have been a faithful student in his youth at the very ordinary local village synagogue in Nazareth, and as an adult, humbly participated in the discussions on the meaning of the scriptures, as his community faithfully worked their way through the Jewish liturgical year. In these bleak spiritual times, all would have known that there had been richer periods in the past that they longer for again, and more, the coming of the long-awaited Messiah to set them free.

But note; it was not that the word of the Lord was *never* clear, and that visions *never* happened, only that they were *rare* and *not widespread*. In all times like this, careful listening and searching for depth of insight, are called for.

The young man, Samuel, was an apprentice of the High Priest, Eli, at Shiloh, the ancient city in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It was *the* worship centre before King Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem much later. Samuel's job was to be an attendant to the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the two tablets of the Law, Moses had received on Mount Sinai (Exodus 25 and 37). The Ark represented God's presence among his people, and where he was believed to 'dwell' (as explained in Exodus 25:8-22). In the simplest terms, if anyone came before the Ark, they would come before the Lord. As Eric Rust explains:

... the Ark was a tangible sign of God's presence among his people. ... As the Ark was in some sense an extension of God's personal being into the visible realm, it was to a degree in anticipation of the Incarnation. Of the Ark it could be said, "Immanuel" – "God with us."

Samuel was sleeping in the Holy of Holies. It must have been in the early hours of the

morning because the lamp of God, symbolising his presence, had not yet gone out (Exodus 27:20), when Samuel heard someone calling him. He did the logical thing and assumed that it must have been his master, and so he obediently went to Eli. The repetition emphasises the reality of the experience and that Samuel had not just been dreaming.

This is a lovely incident. It took time for Eli to work out what was happening, so that he could effectively guide Samuel through what was needed. As Joyce Baldwin explains:

However, many books are written on the subject of God's calling, for each individual who receives that call, a mystery remains. Is this an authentic message from God, and if so, how am I to know that?

In Samuel's case, his call came through an audible voice (for him at least) and its verification took time, until Eli realised what was happening, and was able to advise Samuel accordingly. Samuel was given the additional confirmation of a figure standing in the shrine (verse 10). When he realised what he was called to do, and initially it was to deliver a harsh message to his much-loved mentor, he probably wished that he had never been called at all. You can imagine what went through his mind as he lay there until morning (verse 15). And as his prophetic ministry progressed through the following years, he would have realised what it meant to faithfully respond, and this must have 'tested his strength of character and resolve.' (Baldwin)

But notice how Samuel had been faithfully serving the Lord for many years – in God's presence, and yet he still '*... did not yet know the Lord ...*' because '*... the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him ...*'

This is such an important point. You will recall that Samuel was a long-awaited for, and much cherished son, granted to Hannah and Elkanah, after Hannah's impassioned prayer at Shiloh. Her gratitude and devotion to God was such that she was willing to give Samuel back to God as recorded in 1 Samuel 1:24 ff:

<sup>24</sup>When she had weaned him, ... they brought the child to Eli. <sup>26</sup>And she said, ... <sup>27</sup>For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him.

<sup>28</sup>Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; *as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.*'

In chapter 2:11 we read of how '*... the boy remained to minister to the Lord, in the presence of the priest Eli.*' And this Samuel faithfully did, through his childhood years, yet all the time, he was unaware of the reality of God. For me, this begs the question: "Why had Eli not done a better job of nurturing Samuel in the faith?" At some time in the past, Eli must have been a faithful priest, honouring his call, to the extent that, when he was in his late 50s, on the death of Samson, he was also appointed a Judge in Samson's place. But then something must have gone wrong, because he had not raised his sons well, and while they too served as priests, they were certainly not worthy of this important role – as verse 13 explains: '*... his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.*'

This raises some important points. *Firstly*, it is not uncommon that people serve in the church, only to discover that, like Samuel, they do not in fact know the Lord. Notably, this had been the experience of Martin Luther and John Wesley, before their 'epiphanies', but also many others down the ages. While this probably refers to none of us, it is nevertheless good for all of us to be honest with ourselves, difficult and challenging though this always is,

and take the opportunity to ask: “Is my relationship with God and others what it should or could be?” “Is there any way in which my spiritual life could be better?” *Secondly*, it is wonderful to be reminded of the fact that it is never too late to do something to change things, if needs be. Wesley, in fact, encouraged all Methodists to regularly examine themselves in this way, be accountable to others in their Class Meeting, and support each other as they grew in their holiness – suggesting that there can *always* be more – because we can always love more. Wesley even spoke of the need to strive for ‘Christian Perfection’ which many see as his lasting legacy to the Church.

Samuel listened for the Word of God and, and with guidance from Eli, encountered God. I sense that our members are like Philip who was obedient and willing to share his encounter with the Lord with Nathaniel, just as we are all prayerfully seeking ways to reach out to others in our communities with the good news. I believe these people today, because of our crisis, are increasingly open like Nathanael, to hear our message, and Jesus can be with them too.

Because we are loved by God, we are all able to: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening?” Jesus is always there for us, offering to meet us at our point of need, and to fill or re-fill us with the joy of his Spirit, making everything real for each one of us. When we listen, hear and respond, we will in turn be able to invite others, as we reach out to them with the reality and depth of our own experiences, and say to them: “Come and see?”

**Amen.**

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