

SCRIPTURE John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' 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.'

Sermon: **Follow me**

Today's reading is from a longer passage describing how Jesus created a group of followers, starting with two unnamed disciples of John the Baptist, then Andrew and Peter, and here (in this reading) Philip and Nathanael.

Why did they follow him? On the face of it, Jesus was an unlikely hero, a nobody from nowhere. As Nathanael dryly observed to his gushing friend Philip, 'Can anything good come out of Peoria; okay, Nazareth': same kind of place. Despite unpromising circumstances, there was something about Jesus that was special. He said to Philip, 'Follow me', and Philip upped and followed him. Just like that, and on the smallest acquaintance. He told his friend Nathanael: 'This man is the real deal, the one we've been waiting for'.

I think I know what Philip meant. Centuries ago, when I was about five years old, I read a book by Enid Blyton. She was well-known for Noddy, Big Ears, the Famous Five, and other stories that lots of English children my age were brought up on. But she also

wrote a book called, A Children's Life of Christ, and it was this book that changed my life forever. All her fictional characters were fun, though now outdated, and they helped me to read and pass the time, but this character, Jesus Christ, was inspiring. She wrote of his miracles, his cruel death, and its amazing culmination in resurrection. But it was the stories Jesus told, what we call the parables, that most engaged and moved me. Ever since, whenever I read them, I discover what it means to live in a world that's full of God's presence, if only we have sufficient courage and insight to discern it. In these stories, people do ordinary and crazy and wicked and stupid and terrible things, yet God, sometimes scarily, cares and is present: God engages with people, forgives, offers new beginnings and hope. Because of the life and teaching of Jesus, I look out on today's world, full of war and violence, politicians who lie and line their pockets rather than tell and live the truth, people whose lives are damaged or even destroyed by the words and actions of others, and I can still: hope. Hope: for a better world; for a perfect union of reason, emotion, and action; for the triumph of the good. I can see glimpses of what God really intend, amid the catastrophes of human actions.

So, Jesus created a band of followers by offering them a compelling vision of what life can and, by God's grace, will be. It was so powerful that they wanted to share it with others, and he was so magnetic a figure that they wanted to talk of him. Jesus was charismatic to be sure, the sort of person who attracts others to them. But Philip and Nathanael weren't simply fanboys. To follow Jesus isn't like following the Kardashians or a sporting or music idol. A life spent following Jesus has a worthy hero. There are also terrifying yet oddly comforting moments when the veil between this world and the next parts and we glimpse a holy mystery. As Jesus told Nathanael: 'You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'. Such moments are beyond our power truly to describe or share.

Yet tell of them and of Jesus we must. If others are to hear about him, we need to tell them. Jesus didn't write a book or become a star of stage or screen. If his wonderful, transformative message of God's caring interaction with his creation is to get a hearing, it's down to us, his followers.

Ordinary people have shared his story, for over two millennia. But also, great religious orders and missionary societies have been founded to help spread the message of Jesus and create new followers. As a young man, I was sufficiently motivated to get ordained, and to go to India. Looking back, I'm not quite sure why I was so set on going there. I simply knew, as many people do who take faith seriously, that it was some ridiculous but necessary thing that I needed to make happen, and somehow find the ways to do so. Now I know why God led me there. I discovered there that the message Jesus taught wasn't just for people like me. Hope for a better world breaks down all barriers of language, color, gender, and culture. The stories of and about Jesus are amazingly adaptable because they speak to fundamental human needs, whether in Nazareth, London, Hyderabad, Peoria or Aurora. In India, I also found faith, hope, love, and much to admire in people who followed another religious hero than Jesus to similar ends that would transform human life for the better.

Philip and Nathanael could not have foreseen how following Jesus would change the course of human history. They just did their bit. And the bit that they did is now largely lost to us. There are fleeting references to both elsewhere in the New Testament and some edifying legends about them, but mostly there's: silence. Even so, there's more information about them than the first two disciples of Jesus recorded in John's Gospel; they left John the Baptist to follow Jesus but are unnamed. As for the Baptist himself: there's a poignant moment just after today's reading when he says of Jesus: 'He must increase, and I must decrease'. Our contemporary world favors foolish mantras like: 'I'm worth it, I deserve it' or even 'It's all about me'. Christian discipleship can't work with

such nonsense. Life isn't about our deserving but is an unmerited gift. And it's not about us but concerns a world we share with others, who should be allowed as much space to flourish as we do.

If we follow Jesus, it's **his** message, the life of God that **he** embodied, the possibilities **he** named, that are important. We are each, to use an ancient religious saying, a finger pointing to the moon. It's the moon at which we and others should be looking. That's hard because most of us want to be noticed. When I was a seminary professor, I used to irritate many enthusiastic ordinands who were convinced that they had much to offer God. I can't remember how many times I said to one or other of them: 'When it's about you, I'll be the first to let you know'. No doubt many of them were grateful when I left and came here! But not the best of them because they knew that in those moments when we live the life of God's kingdom, when we force our egos out of the way to let the light in, when we mirror God's grace: then hope is possible, and we're truly followers of Jesus. Fifty years from now, who will remember you or me? It doesn't matter. What matters is that we followed Jesus, that we were loyal, kind, selfless, and encouraged others so to be.

We have one consolation for our anonymity. When we're long forgotten, Jesus remembers us, just as he was mindful of the penitent thief on the cross. And he remembers who each of us essentially is. In today's reading, he disarms Nathanael by saying: 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' This was no mere flattery. Jesus laid bare what gift it was that Nathanael had to enable him to flourish as his follower. Nathanael was an open book, a person of honor and integrity, someone to be trusted. Gifts differ. Some people preach, some are extravert enough to take the gospel message door to door, some are kind in ways that seem to show God's own generosity, some give money, some listen to others attentively. Each of us has a repertoire of gifts

that make us who we are. We can use them simply to get on or get by. Or we could use them in the service of the man from Nazareth, to help mend the world.