

St Brandon's, Sermon for 21st January 2024.

Revelation 19:6-10, John 2:1-11

Nathanael and the revelation in Cana

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Last week Geoff preached on the passage before this where Nathanael encounters Jesus. Having wondered if anything good could come out of Nazareth, Nathanael rapidly changes to declaring Jesus as the Son of God, the King of Israel, because Jesus had foreknown him: seen him for who he was, sat under a fig tree. Geoff quizzed us: did Nathanael become a disciple? Andrew and Simon have just been called, and Philip, Nathanael's friend, so it was an easy assumption to make, and I was caught out, but Nathanael did not become one of the twelve disciples but instead represents the 'everyman' who becomes a believer. You could say, we are all Nathanaels.

Cana is Nathanael's hometown so its highly likely he was a guest at this wedding feast along with the rest of the village. What did he see? A ripple of consternation at the delay in refilling the wine flagons? A compassionate concern on Jesus' face, and an exchange with the servants?

Only yesterday, Jesus had promised Nathanael that he would '*see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*'.

Nathanael was surely scrutinising Jesus' movements, surely witnessed something of the exchanges, and drank of the rich and good wine, now in abundant supply.

What was the effect on Nathanael? Did he realise that Jesus's promise had so readily been fulfilled? Did he catch sight of and feel the proximity of heaven to earth and earth to heaven – heavenly messengers ascending and descending - in a moment of revelation?

What did he make of the fact that Jesus had transformed the water for purification into wine of the finest that seemed never to run out? What kind of purification is that?

Did he get caught up in a moment of glory? A sense of awe of the highest and deepest that something extraordinary had arrived amongst them in the person of Jesus? A sense that they were all poised on the edge of something new –

an era of extraordinary transformation of things and people? Of a major change for his people – for the whole world – for himself included?

We are all Nathanaels. We may not be living in Cana in the privileged time of Jesus' earthly life but we know and believe that Jesus is still at work in the world, does still make his presence known. Or do we?

Are we open to the possibility that it might be God showing up at times we least expect? In moments of celebration or persecution, in moments of worship or domesticity?

Do we admit the possibility in hope, or dismiss it as too presumptuous or elevated for us?

What does our church teach us to expect? And our friends? Do we exchange stories that limit us to a belief in coincidences, or that open us up to the tentative conclusion that God just might have showed up?

Or do we pepper our conversation so liberally with confident statements about God telling us to do this and that at every turn that we seem to have no need to doubt, or think too much about choices?

How we are outwardly, the culture we adopt and the church teaching we have imbibed will depend on the worshipping and friendship communities we have been part of, what their norm is. We may have moved around in the course of life and sampled a range, or had quite homogenous experiences, and how we talk about God, and how we view worship is going to reflect that. But how we are affected internally, spiritually, is much more relevant to the strength and development of our faith.

Let's return to our original Nathanael, living in Cana, living with the memory of his encounters with Jesus. What did Nathanael do following these experiences? We know he remained close with his friends who were among the twelve because he is named as being with them when Jesus appears to them on the beach, before his ascension. Although not a disciple, he is present at key moments that reveal Jesus to be more than just a friend, teacher, healer, guide, more than that: to be mysteriously connected with God, Father, The Holy One. Armed with that interior knowledge of Jesus, what could be more likely than that Nathanael continues to explore the meaning of Jesus by associating with others in gatherings that were the earliest church. As a friend of Peter, the Rock, Nathanael would likely be in the forefront of watching that

movement and playing some part in it. He would have been part of the seeking and struggling to tease out the right way to go, and what to believe. To give his testimony as part of the wealth of first-hand witnessing that they needed to digest and pray over, to try to understand what was needed to be true followers and faithful worshippers.

Wind on another three or so generations of 'Nathaneals' to the year 95 CE, when a Jew named John experienced immensely powerful revelations about the nature of the world and the requirement to follow Jesus which he wrote down as the book known simply as Revelation. The passage we heard today refers to another marriage feast, that of the Lamb and his bride. *'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb'*. Paul had used the image of the church as Christ's bride in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians thirty years earlier, so readers in 95CE would know what John was meaning, and see the connections with feasting at the fulfilment of scripture both at the wedding feast at Cana and the banquet at the end of time.

Christians – Nathanaels – in every generation since must have wondered if they were among those blessed who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. Because churches can have a habit of making things seem both more complicated, and more controllable than they are.

In the first 300 years of Christianity the church changed from a persecuted minority to being the legal religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine. Down the centuries as the church structures developed and the machinery of the institution grew, so did the rules and observations, and the possibility of not making the grade could seem a matter of compliance with regulations as much as any desire to know God. The power wielded by some individuals in the church created temptations and corruptions. Large sums of money were required to pay for the upkeep of the strands of the church that had become the most complicated and powerful. Rebellions and reforms divide and divide again until so many variations of how to worship and the relative importance of everything from sacraments to candles, music and icons becomes definitively different from denomination to denomination.

Meanwhile, what has happened to Nathanael, to the 'everyman' who becomes a believer, to US? We find ourselves each in our separate church, doing what we do the way we do it. We don't know the reason why we do half of it, and shy away from changing to the way other churches do it because that is equally baffling - and alien, to boot. Yet it is where God has placed each of his

Nathanaels, and where we aspire to encourage, and learn and grow. But we must not lose sight of the primary need for internal growth. If we are not being fed and growing, changing, being gradually transformed, then we are not receiving the blessing offered to us at the wedding in Cana. Which church of which Christian denomination we attend is not the question at stake, it is whether we are led to a knowledge of God internally and transformatively that matters.

We must assume that any sector of church that has made itself properly ready as bride, appropriately clothed in integrity, compassion and worship of the true God is responding in faith to Jesus' invitation, and we are safe to travel with them, however differently clothed they might be.

However, the end of the passage from Revelation contains warning of another danger we must heed: the angel who reveals the message of God is not the one to be worshipped. I don't think it's a great risk in St Brandon's but it is a very real risk that a very charismatic leader diverts the focus onto themselves and fails to say, "*Worship God. I am but a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus.*" In other words, "Look only to God. I am only another Nathanael on a journey of discovery like yourself."

In this week of prayer for Christian Unity, we will be praying for a closer walk towards God with all our fellow Christians, the many Nathanaels of today. Praying that we may find God revealing himself to us as we worship and work. Praying that we may find transformation though following Mary's words "*Do whatever he tells you.*"

Amen