

Nathanael

St Brandon's

Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-18; John 1: 43-end

14 January 2024

I want to focus this morning on Nathanael, the key character in our gospel reading apart from Jesus, of course, to see what we might learn from his story that might be helpful to us.

It might help to start by getting the context and the geography in our heads. After the prologue in John's gospel, he moves on to the testimony of John the Baptist. And we're told that John the Baptist was baptizing in 'Bethany across the Jordan' (1: 28) – see the map which refers to Bethany (beyond Jordan), and not to be confused with the other Bethany which isn't beyond the Jordan but much closer to Jerusalem and where Lazarus, Mary and Martha lived, a donkey was procured, and other events took place.

John the Baptist has, before our gospel reading, seen and testified to Jesus as the Son of God, and introduced two of his own disciples – Andrew and Peter – to Jesus. And that's where our gospel reading picks up, with the focus shifting from John the Baptist to Jesus. And the passage begins with Jesus deciding to go to Galilee. Now as we can see, that's no small journey – 70 or 80 miles. So, when He finds Philip and says, "Follow me", that could easily have a double meaning: follow me as a disciple, and follow me back to Galilee. Now at least the second of these 'follows' may have been relatively easy for Philip because, as we're told he, and Andrew and Peter, were from Bethsaida (see map).

We might wonder how the three of them had the time to have travelled from Bethsaida to Bethany across the Jordan, but it would seem that all three of them had heard of John the Baptist and had made the journey to see him. They must have been, at the very least intrigued, and quite possibly on their own spiritual journey, searching for truth, searching for God.

And it's Philip, of course, who introduces Nathanael. Now a quick quiz with two questions: 1) does Nathanael go on to become an apostle?; 2) does he appear anywhere else in the gospels, and if so where? Answers: No (see Luke 6: 14-16), and Yes. At the end of John's gospel, after Jesus's resurrection when the disciples go to Galilee and Peter says he's going fishing, it says, "Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples" (John 21: 2). Oh! So Nathanael was also from Galilee, indeed from Cana (see map) very close to Nazareth. So when Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", it's a bit like us saying, "Can anything good come out of Crook?"



So it seems that Nathanael had also made the journey from Galilee, and like Andrew, Peter and Philip, was also on a spiritual journey, searching for truth, searching for God. So, the first thing we might learn from this story, from Nathanael and the others, is a question to each of us: how far are we prepared to go in our spiritual journey, our search for truth, our search for God?

Now, as we know, Nathanael is under a fig tree, and 'under the fig tree' was a common rabbinic expression for those who studied the Torah (the first five books of our Old Testament) at home. So, it's possible that Nathanael was under the fig tree studying the Torah. But if that's the case we might learn something else. Was Nathanael 'stuck', as it were, in the old dispensation? Or was he willing, indeed ready to move on from there, open to new ways in which God might reveal Himself? Are we?

Nathanael, as we've seen, seems at first dismissive of the possibility of anything good coming out of Nazareth, but he's nonetheless open to Philip's invitation: "Come and see". And there then follows this little vignette, this rather intriguing interaction between Jesus and Nathanael. Nathanael is physically walking towards Jesus – a willingness to at least explore who this Jesus is, even if he's still somewhat hesitant, even if he's still a long way from where Philip had got to in his thinking – Jesus as "him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote". But Nathanael has, at least, it would seem, an open attitude to Jesus and who He might be. Do we have a similarly open attitude to Jesus and who He might be?

Well, so far the initiative has come from Nathanael, but as the scene develops we realise that Jesus has not been passive. The first thing we might notice is that Jesus has already noticed Nathanael: “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you”. For Jesus, nothing, it seems, goes un-noticed. Do we sometimes feel God hasn’t noticed us, noticed where we’re at in our lives, the struggles as well as the joys? It might be that the story of Nathanael helps us to believe that God notices everything, that nothing slips by un-noticed.

But more than that. Nathanael is not only noticed but known. “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit”, says Jesus. And Nathanael replies “Where did you come to *know* me?” Now that might imply just a physical question, and Jesus’s response “under the fig tree” answers the question at that level. But surely there’s more going on here.

Have a look at this picture:



It’s by Mark Cazalet, a contemporary artist, and is part of the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art. It’s oil on paper and measures only 18cm (7”) square. The title is, at the least, descriptive: *Nathanael (asleep under the fig tree)*. We’ll come back to why he’s shown asleep in a moment. But first, let’s notice a few other things. Nathanael is lying face up, but apparently naked. He is coloured an unrealistic deep reddy-brown, but that is presumably to emphasise his affinity with the earth, the ground from which he was taken. And he is solid, sculptural, three-dimensional. Cazalet is presumably aiming to emphasise, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit”.

But what Cazalet has also captured here is the 'metaphysical' moment when every part of Nathanael was "seen" by Christ.

"See", in John's gospel, always has a double meaning. It's always not just physical but also implies a deeper 'knowing'. So here in this passage, we have Philip's invitation, "Come and see", clearly meaning more than 'why not come and take a selfie with Jesus?'. Jesus, as we've seen, says "I saw you under the fig tree" but goes on to say, "You will see greater things than these ... Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man". And in each case, it is of course more than just physical sight that Jesus is referring to. 'See' is always also referring to a deeper understanding.

So Nathanael is 'seen' by Jesus. The picture, by depicting Nathanael as naked, is saying that every part of Nathanael was seen by Christ – compare this with Psalm 139: 1-5. And we too, surely, are not just noticed by God but seen by Him, known by Him. All of us. There are no secrets. There is no place to hide. And while that is initially quite scary, it actually allows us in the end to relax in God's presence provided we can also trust in the goodness of God, that He knows and loves us just as we are.

And it is, perhaps, that realization of being fully known by a loving God, that leads to Nathanael's 'Eureka' moment. "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" It seems to come out of nowhere, but if Nathanael has already been on perhaps a lengthy journey, not just physically from Cana to Jordan across the river, but spiritually in search first of John the Baptist, then of truth and then of God, this makes complete sense.

Have you had a similar 'Eureka' moment, I wonder? A moment when it all made sense – or at least enough sense to believe it, to go with it, to place your trust in the Christ who reveals God to us? Or perhaps your experience was more gradual, not as explosive as Nathanael's, but still just as real. Or perhaps you're still on the journey ...

But finally, why does Cazalet depict Nathanael asleep? Well, I think he's picking up the last part of the story, where Jesus says to Nathanael, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man". Last quiz question: what story in the Old Testament might Jesus be referring to? Answer: Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28.

In the OT story, Jacob falls asleep and dreams, "that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen, 28: 12). Jacob 'saw' heaven opened, and the movement between earth and heaven of the angels. To Nathanael the same thing is promised, heaven is opened, and the direction of the movement is the same: angels first ascending from the earth, from the Son of Man, the human being lifted to heaven, and then the divine descending to earth.

How might this promise to Nathanael have been fulfilled? Well, as we saw earlier, he was from Cana in Galilee. John's gospel continues directly from our passage to say, "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee" (2: 1). Now I know that 'on the third day' has a special meaning in John's gospel, but let's take it at face value here. Two-three days to get from Bethany across the Jordan to Cana – quite possible. Was Nathanael there, at a wedding in his own village? Did he see the first of the signs that Jesus did which revealed His glory? Heaven, in that sense, opened to him? Well, perhaps.

But what we do know is that Nathanael was a witness to Jesus's resurrection, that he was part of that group that met the resurrected Jesus on the beach at the Sea of Galilee. Heaven opened to him and them.

What of us? The promise is, I think, for us too, in one sense always but maybe also at particular times in our lives, to see heaven opened, to experience guardian angels ascending and descending.

Nathanael was on a journey and open to new ways in which God might reveal Himself. Are we?

Nathanael was noticed by Jesus. Be reassured that we are too.

Nathanael was known by Jesus. Be reassured that we are too, to the depths of our being.

Nathanael had a 'Eureka' moment as God in Christ revealed Himself to him. Maybe we have had something similar. Maybe it's just around the corner. Maybe our journey has been different but no less true to who we are. Maybe we're still on the journey towards Christ.

Nathanael was promised that he would see heaven opened. So are we, and be reassured that guardian angels are no less active now than they were then.

Amen.