

Sermon Notes (SC) - 16th April 2023

Title: Under the Fig Tree (John 1:35-51)

In these weeks following Easter, we are going to turn to the gospel of John. And we are going to explore one of the features that gives John its distinctive character, its distinct “feel” when set alongside the other gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry.

And of the many differences between the gospels, the one we will observe is that John seems very concerned to tell us the individual’s story. John works hard to document the one-on-one encounters with Jesus. So, John seems less concerned for crowds and public discourses, but focusses more on Jesus’ private audiences. So instead of the Sermon on the Mount such as we find in Matthew where Jesus speaks to thousands, John wants to tell us instead about the Upper Room Discourse, which records what Jesus said to his 12 closest friends on the evening of his Last Supper.

John gives us a window into these individual, personal encounters with Jesus Christ, whether it’s the Samaritan woman at the well, or the Pharisee Nicodemus, or even the disciples.

And in the coming weeks, we are going to look at five of these moments - five encounters, and we will see how they are moments of transformation for the people Jesus met. And as we read these texts, and examine these transformed lives, the question before each of us, is: *what does it mean to meet with Jesus Christ today? What does it mean to meet with Jesus Christ today?*

And the first of these transformed lives, the first of these encounters we have chosen, is this exchange between Jesus and the cynic Nathanael.

So let’s begin by setting the scene.

Our reading today comes at the end of John chapter 1. But, of course, John’s gospel opens with the most extraordinary prologue, words we hear read in church at least once a year, and always at Christmas time.

In the beginning was the Word, And the Word was with God, And the Word was God.

And then John moves from this introduction set on a cosmic scale, to focus down on a single event - Jesus’ baptism. And then, from Jesus’ baptism straight to the calling of the first disciples. And this is the setting of our reading today.

And what we have here at the end of John chapter one, are two similar episodes deliberately set in parallel. First Jesus calls Andrew, and his brother Simon. Then Jesus calls Philip and his friend Nathanael. And between these two exchanges the pattern is the same.

1. Jesus calls the first person
2. The first person tells a second person
3. Then Jesus challenges the second person

Jesus calls Andrew, Andrew tells Simon, Jesus challenges Simon, and renames him Simon Peter.

So once we see that formula at work here, and see how Jesus calls Philip, and that Philip tells Nathanael, we now expect Jesus to challenge Nathanael. And he certainly does.

And we notice, first, that John is not afraid to include people's honest first responses to Jesus. John feels no need to fabricate his account, to massage the truth, and say everyone accepted these events without hesitation, or criticism, or questioning. What is Nathanael's first response to the message of Jesus of Nazareth, in v. 46.

Nazareth! Can anything Good come from there?

Now, perhaps to contextualise this a little, imagine instead, Philip is your friend. And Philip says, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus, son of Joseph, who is currently in the Glades in Bromley.

Or, to avoid controversy, and people thinking I'm being mean about Bromley:

Imagine Philip says instead,

We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus, son of Joseph, who is currently at the SavaCentre in Sydenham.

Now, the point is, for a cynic, this news doesn't inspire immediate confidence. We might begin then, to see how we might respond to the news, that of all the places the Messiah is to be found, we are meant to believe, it is from Nazareth.

And if I think about how I generally respond to news, or information, I see something of myself in Nathanael, perhaps more than I do in Philip's initial enthusiasm. So let me just pause and ask, where do you see yourself in this narrative? – are you a Philip, raring to go, to set out on a new adventure, or are you a Nathanael?

But Philip has the best response for a cynic. Never argue with a contrarian; after all, no one was ever argued into the Kingdom of God, but simply say, as Philip does, *Come and See*.

And this is where we come to the extraordinary exchange between Jesus and Nathanael.

⁴⁷ *When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."*

⁴⁸ *"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.*

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹ *Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."*

⁵⁰ *Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that."* ⁵¹ *He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"*

Now, frustratingly, we do not know what is meant by Jesus' phrase, "I saw you under the fig tree." Whether Nathanael was literally sat under a tree in his garden in the heat of the day, or whether the fig tree, as a symbol of Ancient Israel, means something greater. But I want to venture this explanation. Whatever Jesus meant by that phrase, or however Nathanael understood it, it conveyed the sense that Jesus knew him, that Jesus knows who we are. That we are seen by God.

And as we think about how this applies to today, it is to say, that Jesus sees us in the midst of our cynicism, in the midst of our own Nathanael moments. Jesus looks behind the intellectual apparatus and defences we construct around our inner selves. Jesus sees our insecure, contrary spirit, that says that the world must prove itself to me. Jesus sees behind it all, and his call penetrates our loneliness. Jesus' call reaches through our isolation.

And then Jesus says something that sounds bizarre to our ears.

⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"

Now, what on earth does that mean? To get to the heart of this, we need to understand that this is a quote from the Old Testament. This is a reference to the brothers Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament. You will remember that Jacob was the trickster, who tricked his brother Esau of his birthright and of his father's blessing. And having stolen the honours that cultural precedent placed on Esau, he fled for his life. And on the way, he set down in a certain place and had a dream, the so-called Jacob's ladder, of angels ascending and descending a heavenly stairway.

And Jacob's waking response, was to say, "Surely God is in this place and I didn't even know it." And he called that place Bethel, which means, *The House of God*.

God moves beyond the tricks and schemes of Jacob, and confronts him with the truth. That God is doing his own thing. Jesus moves beyond Jacob's baggage, to reveal something of himself.

So, Jesus, quoting this story to our friend Nathanael the cynic, is saying, "I see where you are at. I see beyond your defences. And I will grant you what you want."

When Jesus says that "angels ascend and descend on the son of Man," Jesus is saying that "God reveals himself most clearly in me." So, it's not so much the case that "God is in this place and I didn't even know it", as Jacob said, but "God is in this person and I didn't even know it." That the new and greater Bethel, *the House of God*, is not so much a place, but a person, Jesus Christ.

Today's encounter is for those of us who are cynics. For those, who like me surround ourselves with clever schemes and defences, who demand the world prove themselves to us.

God moves beyond our baggage, he sees where we are at, and invites us - not forces, but invites us - to see in him, the thing the cynic thirsts for most. Truth.

So, if you are a cynic, give thanks for those in your life who are a Philip. Who simply say "Come and see." And respond to the challenge of Jesus Christ, who sees us under the fig tree, and challenges us to see in himself, all that we long for.