

The Second Sunday of the Season of Epiphany

John 1:43-51

We can sense his excitement, can we not, as we hear how Philip spoke to Nathanael; in fact, as we imagine the exchange, we can almost actually *hear* the excitement in Phillip's voice: *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets, Him we have found!* Well, it might very well be that we hear more excitement as we *imagine* the exchange than we would have, had we been there to actually hear it. People are all different, are we not? *You are all different!*, Brian announces to the crowd in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, and the crowd responds in unison: *Yes, we are all different!* Except for the one voice that objects: *I am not!*

Phillip may very well not have been an emotional person, one whose excitement would be evident. He may very well have told Nathanael the great news in a very matter of fact manner: *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets, Him we have found!* If he did, it would by no means mean that he was not excited, or that it was not important to him, having found *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets*. After all, the Truth he had to tell could hardly be more important in itself than it was, could it, now, no matter his tone of voice. Well, it could not. *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets, Him we have found!*

It is a common misunderstanding that unless you can hear the emotion in somebody's voice when he tells you something, it cannot be important, what he is telling you, and so it is not true. It is a bit like thinking that a joke is only funny if the comedian himself laughs at it, or even to think that it is funny *because* he does, or because he says that it is funny.

Be that as it may, regardless of his tone of voice, regardless of exactly how obvious his excitement was or was not, it was indeed important to Philip what he had to share with Nathanael: *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets, Him we have found!* Otherwise, why would he even bother to seek out Nathanael to share it with him, or share it with anybody at all?

And, more importantly, how could it *not* be important to anybody who knew it, that the salvation of God had now come? For this is what it meant, what Philip had to tell Nathanael, that the salvation of God had come, for the salvation of God was what *He* was to come and bring, *of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets*.

As easy as it is to imagine Philip's excitement, regardless, again, of his tone of voice, or exactly how obvious his excitement may or may not have been, as easy will it be for some of us to relate to his disappointment and disbelief at Nathanael's reaction to being told of the salvation of God: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*

Many Christians have been there, particularly when they were new to the faith and had only recently come to know of the salvation of God, how great a gift it is, and just how good God is; excitedly they would share it with their friends and family, only to find, much to their surprise, that none of their friends, nobody in their family, cared about the salvation of God; except those who cared enough to resent it.

Many Christians through the ages have had the opportunity to wonder; how can anyone *not* care about so great a salvation, that in spite of our sins and shortcomings we shall not suffer for ever in Hell, but have fullness of life?

This is the promise of God, and with His promise His salvation is given to sinners, fully and for real, and freely and for nothing, out of His goodness alone, and for no other reason whatsoever, and this at the greatest cost to Himself, that the Son of God, Himself God from eternity, has borne the fullness of suffering for us. He whose goodness hates sin as much as He hates all other evil has had Himself baptised into our sin to take it upon Himself and make it His own, and make Himself one with it, and suffer for us His own judgement against it, in our stead and on our behalf, so that we shall not have to, but can live with Him instead in that fullness of joy which is His heavenly Kingdom and His eternal life, how can anyone not care about so great a salvation, let alone reject it or even resent it? And Christians who have had the experience cannot but be in wonder. Well, they will not only be *wondering*, but also in *frustration*. They have a Word to share with others, by which God Himself would share His eternal life with anyone who will hear it and take it to heart; but how can you persuade somebody to embrace the salvation of God, who is Hell-bent, literally, on not doing exactly that?

Perhaps Pastors in particular know the frustration when some who formally belong to their congregations are not actually Christian and have nothing but contempt for God and His goodness.

There are those who belong to a Lutheran church only because their parents and grandparents did, or because they married somebody who did, but they themselves have no interest whatsoever in the Lutheran faith, or the salvation of God.

Some are content to think that there probably is a god, although nobody really knows, and we should all be good to everybody, except the people I do not like, like those who take God and the faith too seriously, and all good people go to heaven, and something called *Jesus* may have something to do with it; they think that that is Christian faith, which it is not, and that they are Christian, and they see no little reason to be honest with themselves, and the congregation, and God, and go somewhere else, for they do not care enough about the Truth of God or the faith of the Church to even do that.

And sometimes Christians become bored with the Word of God of His salvation, by which He gives His salvation to them; a bit like the Israelites in the Wilderness, who complained to Moses about the food God gave to them and by which He kept them alive, that *our soul loathes this worthless bread*. They come to want something else, more enjoyable, more exciting or entertaining, or just something that makes them *feel good*.

For a Pastor to see this at work in any parishioner of his not only presents a professional challenge, rather, it is outright painful; if he cares, that is, and shame be upon him if he does not! The salvation of a soul entrusted to his care is at risk. Not because being more interested in the Gospel than in anything else is the one good work one has to do to to be saved, but rather because disregard for the salvation of God is not only ungodliness, which it is, but also the beginning of unbelief in those who are of the faith, and a hindrance to the salvation of God in those who are not.

But how can a Pastor persuade anyone to embrace the salvation of God, who will not know of it? After all, there are none so blind as those who will not see; so what can anyone say to those who will not hear? How can you convince those whose hearts and minds are closed to the Word of God, and His salvation? What could Philip do to convince Nathanael, that some nobody from nowhere, which was what *Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph* would amount to, is *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets*?

I suppose Philip could have argued to convince Nathanael that it was actually not at all impossible that something good could come out of Nazareth. He could even have argued that it was not impossible that *Him of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and also the Prophets* would come out of Nazareth, which would be a bit of a challenge, since Nazareth was not important enough to be mentioned at all, by Moses or by any of the Prophets.

Philip did not not, though; instead it was given to him simply to say: *Come and see!* And so Nathanael came and saw. And so he came to see that our Lord Jesus is, as Nathanael could not but confess it, *the Son of God and the King of Israel*. Nathanael learned that our Lord Jesus had seen him while he was under the fig tree, presumably to pray; Jews would often seek privacy for prayer under the dense foliage of the fig tree, where supposedly only God would be able to see them. And Nathanael learned that our Lord Jesus knew him already, and knew him to be *an Israelite in whom there is no deceit*.

It is always to seek to reason those who do not care about God and His Truth into realising that they must embrace His Truth because His Truth really is *the Truth*. As tempting as it is, however, as futile is it, also. For *the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God*, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it; *they are foolishness to him, nor can he know them, because they are but spiritually discerned*. Sinners cannot understand or acknowledge the things of God, because sin in us will not allow it; not until God Himself makes us to, by breathing His own Spirit into us, and His love, by His living Word of love, and makes us to come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance. As the Apostle also writes it, *the Word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God, and His power unto salvation for all who believe*.

We will accomplish nothing by seeking to reason with those who will know neither of God nor of His salvation to win them over by our own wisdom, or, for that matter, by our charm, or some other talent of ours; well, win them over we might, but not for God, not as He really is, nor for His salvation. Only He Himself can do that, by the power of His love, as the power of His love works in His Word of love.

But as it was given to Philip it is given to us to invite unbelievers to come and meet Himself where He is to be found, in His Church, which is, as the Apostle writes it, *His fullness who fills all in all*. In the life of His Church, in the Word and worship of His salvation, He Himself comes and confronts sinners with Himself, and with ourselves, also, and who we are before Him, those sinners who are His Christians as well as those who are not that yet, so that we see how we are not only lost but also loved with the greatest love of all, what He has suffered for us, and what He gives to us, freely and for nothing, out of His goodness alone, and for no other reason. And those who have ears to hear will hear, and have eternal life.

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! Amen.