

## SERMON 14 JANUARY 2018

You may well be wondering what that video about a homeless man has to do with the reading we have heard about Jesus calling his disciples. I would like you to hold that wondering there for a while, but I hope perhaps we may find something that may bridge the apparent gulf between these two stories.

Last week the lectionary gave us Mark and we heard his sparse account of Jesus coming to John to be baptised, as many others did. We heard how the heaven was torn apart as the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven affirmed for Jesus that he was God's beloved son, that God was pleased with him. It might seem more reasonable to continue with Mark's account, but the lectionary doesn't do it like that. Since it is on a three year cycle, based on the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, John only gets a look in at particular times, especially in Lent and the Easter season, and today.

So here we are, leaping across into John and perhaps you can hear how different his gospel is. Yes, Jesus is calling his disciples, as he does in the other accounts, but who are these people we know little about, and why are they important to the story? Had we started reading a few verses earlier we would have heard that the story started with Andrew, who had been listening to John the Baptist and seen him pointing out Jesus as the Lamb of God, so Andrew had followed him. The next day he took his brother Simon Peter along as well, saying that he had found the Messiah. Jesus then names Simon as Cephas, or Peter. Evidently Jesus is travelling about, because, as we heard in this morning's reading, he leaves Galilee. Jesus next finds Philip, who, we are told, like Andrew and Simon, comes from Bethsaida, over the hill from Nazareth. He now calls Philip to follow him. John seems to be building up the story, because, the next thing is that Philip finds Nathaniel and tells him that they have found the one that was written about in the Scriptures, Jesus of Nazareth. You may have noticed that there is a lot of "finding" going on. The verb has been used five times in as many verses. But now there is a kind of pivotal point. We didn't, before, hear any verbal response from these others, but John tell us how Nathaniel reacted. "Nazareth!" he says. "Can anything good come from there?"

There is no love lost between the people of Bethsaida and Nazareth. It seems such local rivalries have always existed! Sydney/Melbourne, maybe even Australia/ New Zealand! It can be much more localised than that. We didn't know, when we came to

Sydney 20 years ago, that living in Parramatta we were classed as Westies. Now, of course, we are more in the heart of Sydney as the west has moved west. But that classification of Westie didn't indicate much that was positive.

How could anything good come out of Nazareth! The intentional irony is that the only one who could be called truly good came from Nazareth. But an assumption was made by Nathaniel, and that had to be broken down. He had to come to see things differently. This is where the dominant verb in the story changes. Philip tells Nathaniel to "Come and see". Jesus now sees Nathaniel approaching. Apparently he sees him in more ways than one because he says that here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Nathaniel is amazed and asks Jesus how he knows him. Jesus then makes this rather extraordinary statement that he saw him sitting under the fig tree before Philip called him. Another kind of seeing?

Remember this from Psalm 139? *"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit down and when I rise; you discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways."* Whatever it is that Jesus is indicating that he has seen, it is enough for Nathaniel to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God, the king of Israel. Jesus now tells Nathaniel that he believed because Jesus had told him he had seen him under the fig tree, but he adds that Nathaniel would see far greater things than this and would see heaven open and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. There is a lot of seeing now happening.

Now we could spent some time looking at all this imagery that John is using and why. But I would like to focus on something else that is going on in this passage.

John seems to be telling his readers that there is much in the life of faith that is waiting there for us to find. John has described how those who became the first disciples were apparently looking out for something new and vital. When they went looking they not only found Jesus but were found by him, found in a new way. They then found that they were called to follow this man whom they sensed was the end of their searching. Once they had taken this step, as for Nathaniel, there is no hiding place even if they had wanted one. *"If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."* The psalmist describes some of the terror of being known so profoundly, of there being no place to hide, but goes on to portray a deep security in

trusting in that knowing of God. *“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!”*

There is a finding and a being found. There is a calling that goes with that. There are many things which may stop us from going on searching for truth and goodness, perhaps, not least, our low expectations of finding and even fewer of being found.

But there is also a seeing and being seen. And here we find that it is our assumptions that may stop us seeing. Had Philip not persuaded Nathaniel to come and see, Nathaniel might have dismissed the possibility of this man from Nazareth being anything good. His vision was blinkered. John makes such contrast with Jesus' vision of Nathaniel, which was clear.

How often do we make assumptions about other people? We do it regularly: we do it about strangers based on how they look, the way they talk, where they live, what cultural or religious background they may have, and so on. We make assumptions about people we know a little, based on what school they went to, how much or how little education they have had. We make assumptions about people we know well because we may indeed have grown blind to aspects that are more hidden from view because they are areas of hurt and sensitivity. In our media driven world our opinions of people are formed, and can become quite hardened, based on comments from sources that are often questionable. We give weight to ill-informed and sometimes fabricated statements. It was a year ago that Clive and I went to Lebanon. We carried our own presuppositions, but were also very aware of those of others, not often shaped by first-hand knowledge. This became clear in the man we met on Central Station as we were all carting suitcases to the airport line train. When he asked us where we were going and we said “Beirut”, he replied that he hoped we had our bullet-proof vests.

It takes a lot of wisdom to see beyond the assumptions that float about all around us, but how important it is that we do, because our society, our communities, our churches need us to see more clearly.

Let's go back to that video. I wonder what assumptions you brought to it. I know I made many. I suspect that most of us do this much of the time when we see people huddled under old doonas or cardboard on our streets. The way the video is made, we were obviously meant to be wondering what was going on for this homeless man was. We probably thought that the two men who came and sat beside him were

unkind, if not rather cruel. We may have felt the whole set-up was cruel and kind of taunting. What was hidden from us was the real story. In the end, we may imagine things from the bits that were revealed but we never know the whole story.

*“If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”*

Maybe the readings today are suggesting to us that it is only God who ever knows a person’s whole story; only God who truly sees and knows. Our own vision may be limited, but, when we keep on looking we discover that we are always being found by the one who knows us, the one who loves us, the one from whom we need not hide, even though at times we might like to. We need not, because it is that endlessly searching God who never gives up on us, wherever or whoever we might be.

John tells us about that first call, those first discoveries of life-changing seeing and being seen and known. As we hear in the Psalm, that movement doesn’t happen just once and then leave us while we build up more solid assumptions about who this Jesus is for us and what following him might mean. Most surprisingly, we find that we are being called, called to keep finding, to keep seeing anew, and to keep on discovering life together as followers of one who came, so surprisingly, out of Nazareth. He keeps on calling us because he hopes we will see clearly enough to discern the way, the real wisdom that the world needs to see; to find the wisdom that can break through misguided assumptions and offer life.