

Nathanael meets Jesus...

... being 'seen' by Jesus is the key

A sermon given on the the Second Sunday of Epiphany, 17th January 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Attended Communion Service.

John 1:43-End

I don't know whether you've been as shocked as I have by events over recent weeks in the United States of America; not just those dramatic scenes of an angry mob storming the seat of government, the Capitol in Washington, having been incited by their own president; but rather the background of millions of people who think that the votes in the presidential election were somehow fraudulent. Despite the fact that there have been nearly 70 court cases to investigate the claims of fraud and nearly all have proved completely baseless, and despite the complete lack of evidence to support such claims, it appears there are tens of millions of Americans who think that the election result was stolen from them. Now, it might be tempting to characterise such folk as poorly educated, ignorant dupes, people who have been manipulated by dishonest politicians and who can't tell the difference between truth and falsehood. But I don't think that will quite do. There are simply too many people who think they've been cheated and too many of them are perfectly well-educated.

The problem is not that such people are irrational or stupid; it's rather that they are too rational. The thing about folk who believe in conspiracy theories is that they often pride themselves on being sceptical; they like to think of themselves as being supremely rational; as people who have questioning minds; and who like to look below the surface; and who don't believe everything they're told; so that if the evidence fails to deliver 100 percent certainty, they doubt it. And since nothing is 100 percent certain, it becomes difficult to know what to believe. The only thing which such people feel sure of is what they've seen with their own eyes and what they felt with their own emotions. For them, doubts and scepticism has become a way of life, and in such a state of mind, it's easy to fall prey to all kinds of conspiracy theories. But it isn't just those at the extreme end: that attitude of doubt and scepticism is something that characterises our whole culture; it's prevalent in our media and our attitudes to those in authority; we don't need experts, as the saying goes; everything is doubted. Seeing is the only sure ground for believing, seeing things for ourselves.

And at the heart of this morning's gospel reading, there is a man who is sceptical and who doubts what he's being told. This is Nathanael who is completely sceptical about the possibility of Jesus of Nazareth being the messiah, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", he says. He doubts the testimony of his friend Phillip because he hasn't seen for himself. Phillip counters Nathanael's doubts with an invitation, "Come and see" - see for yourself, see with your own eye that it's true.

And this theme of 'seeing' runs throughout John's gospel. Jesus is introduced right at the beginning as 'The Light', the true light coming into the world to enlighten everyone, to help us to see. John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." Jesus's first words in the gospel are a question to John's disciples, "What are you looking for?" And he follows that with the same invitation that Philip gives to Nathanael, "Come and see." John, in his gospel explores the idea of Jesus as the 'Light of the World'. The blind man whose sight is restored by Jesus says, "I was blind, but now I see", in contrast to the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees. Mary Magdalene brings news of the resurrection to the other disciples saying, "I have seen the Lord." But Thomas doubts, saying, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, I will not believe." And so in John's gospel also, 'seeing is believing'. But of course, it's not just physical seeing. For John, seeing is a way of understanding the world; the kind of 'seeing' which all these passages are talking about is really 'insight'; understanding; belief; 'spiritual seeing'.

It's not just that seeing is believing [*; but also that if you believe that*] paedophiles and communists control [*thing*] the government and the media, then you tend to read [*see*] the facts in that light and everything is interpreted that way. And in our own country, if you're pro or anti Brexit, you will tend to read the news stories against that background; stories that confirm our initial belief will resonate, and the ones that don't we will tend to discount - and we all do it. And if you think the idea of God is dangerous and outdated, you will think all talk of God is nonsense. But if you believe Jesus is the 'Light of the World', then he becomes not just the light you're trying to look at, he becomes the sun whose light enables you to see everything else. As St Anselm once said, "I do not understand in order to believe; I believe, in order to understand."

So 'believing' is 'seeing'. And in John, there is a strong connection between light and seeing and truth: to see clearly is to see truly. The light reveals the truth about the world and about ourselves. So Christian believing doesn't just reinforce our own prejudices and

opinions, but also confronts and challenges us with the truth about ourselves. And that's sometimes uncomfortable.

So what is involved in 'coming and seeing' as Nathanael is invited to do. What special gift do I need? In the passage, Nathanael is invited to come and see and he comes to believe in Jesus, but the process is that he is, first of all, 'seen' by Jesus. "Come and See" says Phillip to Nathanael. And then we're told when Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him he said, "Here is a true Israelite." And then Nathanael asked Jesus, "Where did you get to know me?" And Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree." And at that point, Nathanael goes, "Rabbi, you are the son of God; you are the king of Israel." Nathanael 'sees and believes' in Jesus because Jesus has first of all 'seen and known' him. And once Nathanael begins to 'see' Jesus in this sense, once he begins to believe, Jesus promises that he will see more, "You will see greater things than these. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." In other words, when you believe in Jesus, then you will see him as the bridge or the ladder connecting heaven and earth; you'll start to see connections between the spiritual and the earthly; you'll start to see some of the glory of God breaking through in the things of Earth; and you'll start to feel outrage at the things of earth that are offensive in heaven.

So what can we do to make Jesus 'see' us? Of course, we can't do anything to make him see us, but if you feel that Jesus hasn't noticed you, that he's not holding you in his gaze, perhaps one thing we can all do is make sure we're not hiding from him. John says that people love darkness rather than light, and it's hard for Jesus to see us if we're running away and hiding. The relevance of Jesus saying to Nathanael that he saw him 'under the fig tree' is that the fig tree was a symbol for the rabbis of studying the law. So Nathanael, it seems, is someone who meditates on scripture; whose heart is open to God and who isn't hiding; and who can therefore be 'seen' by Jesus?

So I wonder, where are the moments each day where you allow yourself to be seen by the Lord? Moments when you allow yourself to become conscious and mindful of him; moments when you set aside the busyness and distraction of the day to read the scriptures; to be still; to pray.

'Seeing is believing' - but that way ultimately ends in doubt and scepticism, and it's been said that choosing doubt as a philosophy of life is like choosing immobility as a means of transport. 'Believing is seeing' - but that way by itself risks elevating every opinion and prejudice to the status of truth.

What we find in the gospel is that 'being seen by' Jesus helps us to believe; and so believing we can see more clearly - which is to say we see things more through his eyes, eyes of compassion and love. The word of God holds us in his loving gaze. And as he 'sees' us, so in turn, He will help you and me to 'see'.

Reading Text

John 1:43-End

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' ⁵¹ And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you,[a] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'