

# Jesus calls Nathanael ...

## *... from Prejudice to Vision*

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*A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Epiphany, 14th January 2024 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster*

*John 1:43-end*

"Come and see" says Philip to the doubting Nathaniel. The subject of seeing and sight is one that has been very much uppermost in my mind and life in the last few months, because as some of you know I have had cataracts removed from both eyes (very successfully I may say, thankfully). And the subject of seeing and sight is a crucial one: certainly, if you're going through what I've been through, issues around 'Can I see to read?'; - and I had one time when I was really struggling with the altar books, for instance; and have I got sufficient sight to be able to drive safely and legally?

But we use seeing in other ways as well. In fact, in English we use the verb 'to see' as being the equivalent of 'to understand' - somebody explains something to us and we say, "Oh, yes, I see now", meaning 'I understand.'

But (and please don't take this personally) no matter how good our physical sight may be, none of us 'sees' entirely clearly, when it comes to how we see other people and how we see the world. We all have filters and prisms and sometimes things that really get in the way of seeing clearly - and they come out of all sorts of different aspects of our life: how we 'see' will depend to a degree on how we were brought up; what things we were taught as children; what schools we went to; it will depend, particularly when it comes to what's going on in the wider world, on what particular newspaper we read or news bulletin we listen to, or what social media we are on. How we 'see' is conditioned by so many things: it may be our gender; our ethnicity.

All manner of things shape how we see, so that none of us could ever say, 'I can see something or someone objectively.' Now often that doesn't really matter too much - some of the little ways that little quirks we have of how we see things are really quite trivial - but also, they can become of tragic dimensions. Think of how Palestinians see Jews and Jews, Palestinians; how Russians and Ukrainians see each other; how at the beginning of the electoral year, Democrats and Republicans see each other in the United States; how different ethnic groups see each other; how different social groups and economic groups see each other. It can be the basis of lasting hostility and even violence.

Which brings us to the little story in this morning's Gospel, the calling of Nathaniel. Now, a little bit of background here is going to be useful. Notice the two different names, Philip and Nathaniel. Nathaniel is a pure Jewish name. Philip is a Graeco-Roman name. Philip would have been one of those Jews who had scattered out from the old heartlands of the Jewish faith out into the wider world. And there were a lot of them by the time of Jesus'

ministry - Jewish communities all over the known world. And Nathaniel says this strange thing which we don't fully understand, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Now part of that is that Galilee generally was viewed by Judean and Jerusalem based Jews with some suspicion - it was a mixed area. In fact it was often known as 'Galilee of the Gentiles.' And so you had towns side by side, some like Nazareth and Capernaum, which were very much Jewish towns. But then you had others like Tiberius and Caesarea Philippi, which you can guess almost from the names were Graeco-Roman centres. So there was rather a suspicion on the part of people like Nathaniel of anything that came out of Galilee at all. And for some reason Nathaniel seems to have a particular down on Nazareth. But then, in a very short space of time Nathaniel goes from seeing the possibility of a messiah coming from Nazareth through the eyes of a prejudice (which almost certainly he would have inherited and been taught), to having the vision the truth - "You are the son of God. You are the king of Israel." His eyes are opened almost as dramatically as later the eyes of St. Paul would be opened after being blinded on the Damascus road. From prejudice he has gone to real vision - vision of the truth about Jesus. And he is one of the first to make that kind of bold declaration about who Jesus truly is.

Now, when it comes to the way in which we think about our Christian calling, we may think of it in many ways: that we are called to worship God; that we are called to serve other people, particularly the poor and the needy. But I would like to suggest to you this morning that one of the highest callings that we have is, as far as we can, to 'see' clearly, just as Philip says to Nathaniel, "Come and see." And not just see physically but come and understand the truth. Now that's not easy, given we all see the world and reality through various filters that we have acquired in our lifetime. But nothing can be more important, particularly in a world which is so fractious; in a world where increasingly, people look at each other with suspicion and hostility; dividing into groups and subgroups and all sorts of factions; seeing each other as the enemy, the one to be defeated.

Now we can only begin to 'see' clearly if we allow the Spirit to work within us. If we are able and willing to stand back from how we see things and ask ourselves, 'Is this really the truth?' Is it the whole truth about the situation? If I am intended to have a certain attitude towards certain people or groups or countries, how much of that is preconditioning, even prejudice? How much is actually truth?

And how we see others will be how we treat them. I don't know whether any of you (some of you certainly are old enough, and I am old enough to) remember a remarkable man called Bishop Wilson. Bishop Wilson was Bishop of Birmingham in the 1950s and 60s, but before that he had been bishop of Singapore at the time when the Japanese marched in, in 1941 - and he was captured and he was tortured. But he forgave his torturers. And when he was asked how on earth could you forgive the people who did that to you, he said, "I always tried to see them as they would have been when they were children."

And in one of Graham Green's novels, one about a priest called *The Power and the Glory*, he says, "Hatred is just a failure of the imagination." Hatred is just not seeing somebody as they really are. And the ultimate goal is to see us and each other as God sees us - we don't

do that fully in this life - as St Paul said, "We now see in a mirror, darkly, but then we shall see as we are seen." But we can at least begin the journey, the journey that Nathaniel made from prejudice to vision. We can ask God's spirit to help us see more clearly.

And I would suggest that a very good place is to start with ourselves.

Now in 45 years of ministry, I would say that the vast majority of people see themselves as less good, less worthy than actually they are. Those with an overinflated view of their themselves are, on the whole, of a minority. So if we start by seeing ourselves as uniquely loved children of God, then we have the basis for beginning to see other people as they are, the world as it is. We too can tread that journey that Nathaniel takes from prejudice to seeing clearly and then sharing with others what we have seen.

# Reading Texts

## John 1:43-end

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