

The Enthusiast and the Sceptic by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 14th January 2024 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 139:1-18,21-22, John 1:43-51

2nd Sunday in Epiphany, Lectionary Year B

Introduction: What kind of person do you have to be to be a Christian? People who are not Christians often have particular images of what a Christian is like, very likely based on things they have heard or seen in the news media or social media. Many Christians also often have ideas about what a Christian should be like, but feel they don't quite match up.

I've entitled today's sermon *The Enthusiast and the Sceptic*, reflecting the two people that Jesus meets in today's gospel passage. I'm sure you can work out which is which. Philip responds to Jesus' call, "follow me". He has no doubt spoken with Andrew, who started following Jesus the previous day, and he's so excited about having found the long-awaited Messiah that he can't wait to tell his friend Nathanael. But Nathanael pours cold water on Philip's announcement: "*Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?*" Nathanael is a sceptic. He needs evidence, and he also has an opinion about people from Nazareth. But Jesus convinces him, and he becomes a disciple.

Which of these two are you most like? An enthusiast for your faith, or someone who likes to ask difficult questions and needs convincing? Today's passage shows us that there

are many different kinds of Christians, and that God loves them all.

Diversity

John's Gospel introduces us to a variety of people who meet Jesus and respond to him in different ways – people from different backgrounds and with different personalities. Earlier in chapter 1 we meet Andrew and Simon, then Philip and Nathanael. In chapter 3 Nicodemus the Pharisee comes to Jesus by night to learn more about him. In chapter 4 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well, and then a royal official. We see the reactions of other people who meet Jesus as the book progresses, including the paralysed man (chapter 5), the crowds after the feeding of the 5,000 (ch 6), Jesus' brothers (ch7, ch11), people in Jerusalem and Jewish leaders (chs 7,8,10), the blind man (ch 9), Martha and Mary (ch 11 & 12), Simon Peter, the High Priests and Pontius Pilate (chs 18-19), the disciples, Mary Magdalene and Thomas (chs 20-21). Near the end of the book, John writes:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.¹

It's as if John is saying, "I've shown you how other people responded to Jesus – some with faith, some with doubt, some with hostility. What about you – are you going to believe in him and receive eternal life?"

¹ John 20:30-31 NRSV

John also shows us some of the different ways that people meet Jesus – Andrew is signposted by John the Baptist, Simon Peter is brought to Jesus by Andrew, Philip is “found” directly by Jesus, and Nathanael is brought by Philip. How did you come to know Jesus? Who introduced you to him? Or how did you come to hear his call “follow me”?

Being known

Let’s look at the interaction between Jesus and Nathanael. What turns Nathanael from a sceptic to a believer? There’s clearly something powerful about what Jesus says to Nathanael. As he sees him coming, Jesus says “Now there’s a true Israelite, there’s nothing false about him”. Jesus clearly senses what Nathanael has been thinking, and I think he is gently ribbing him. There’s Nathanael, who thinks he’s a “true Israelite”, not like that riff-raff from Nazareth. There’s something in Jesus’ words and the way he looks at Nathanael that tell Nathanael, “I know exactly what you’re thinking.”

What about that talk about sitting under the fig tree? At a purely practical level, perhaps Nathanael was just taking a few moments to relax in the shade. Some interpreters think that sitting under a tree was associated with studying the scriptures or praying. But there’s also an echo of a phrase commonly used in the Old Testament that represents a vision of Israel being in a state of peace and prosperity, in which “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid.”² Perhaps

² Micah 4:4 (ESV), compare 1 Kings 4:25, 2 Kings 18:31 (= Isaiah 36:16), Micah 4:4, Zechariah 3:10

there's a hint that Nathanael was sitting rather too comfortably, so to speak, a bit too complacent about his status as a "true Israelite", or a good observant Jew, leading him to have a "holier than thou" attitude.

Well, whatever the meaning of Jesus' words, it is clear to Nathanael that Jesus has sussed him out, and Nathanael realises that something supernatural is happening. It's just like in Psalm 139, where the Psalmist recognises that God knows him through and through, and even knows what he is about to say before he says it.

The story reminds us that God does know us intimately, better than we know ourselves, but still loves us. A few verses earlier, Jesus looked at Simon, Andrew's brother, and saw not just who he was, but the person he could become – the Rock, which is the meaning of the name he gives him, Cephas in Aramaic, Petros (or Peter) in Greek. God knows us too, and has plans for how we could develop and grow. How does that feel?

An invitation

And that brings us to the third point I'd like to draw out of this story. When Nathanael is amazed that Jesus saw him under the fig tree, Jesus tells Nathanael that "you ain't seen nothing yet", or to use his actual words, "you will see greater things than these" (1:51). So what's the meaning of Jesus words, "you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"³. All Jews would have picked up this reference to the story of Jacob's

³ John 1:51 NRSV

vision in Genesis chapter 28, where Jacob is running away from his brother Esau and in a dream sees a stairway between heaven and earth and the angels of God going up and down on it. God makes Jacob a promise to be with him, bless him and protect him⁴. For Jacob, this is the moment when he realises that God is right beside him and cares for him personally. Now Jesus is saying that Nathanael is going to see that he, Jesus, is like the stairway in Jacob's dream, the connection between heaven and earth, between God and humanity – more than just the Jewish Messiah.

Following Jesus is going to mean for these men a journey of discovery – learning who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him. Jesus' words to Andrew are the same as Philip's invitation to Nathanael: "Come and see". As we start this New Year, let me suggest that each of us takes some time to reflect on where we are going in our lives. How has God worked in your life up to now? What experience have you had of his guidance, his protection, his answers to your prayers? When did you feel closest to God, and how close are you now? Would you like to take up Jesus' invitation to see greater things? Or do you think you know everything you want to know about him? Do you espouse the philosophy of lifelong learning? Are you open to God teaching you and leading you in new ways? Are you up for knowing God better and growing in your faith?

The challenge is to us as individuals and as a church. Are we ready to come with God and see him in action, transforming people's lives? Are we willing to carry on his work wherever

⁴ Genesis 28:10-22

we are, both as individuals and through taking part in the mission of the church? And who could you invite to “come and see”?

Prayer

Lord, we acknowledge that you know everything about us, and have known us since before we were born. Thank you that you love us, in spite of our failings, our weaknesses and sins. Thank you that you promise to be with us, to guide us and protect us, so that we may know you better, grow in faith and show your love to others.

At the beginning of this new year, we ask you to challenge us, encourage us and inspire us to learn from Jesus and follow him more closely. Use us as part of your loving purpose to bring everyone to a knowledge of your love.

We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.