



the Sunday focus

Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
www.longniddrychurch.org.uk

Issue 77

Sunday 5th September 2021

Today's readings

Psalm 139: 1–6 (“Glorify God in Body and Spirit”)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it. Amen. (*NRSV*)

John 1:43–51 (“Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael”)

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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.’ Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ 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.’ Amen. (*NRSV*)

Today's hymns

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1 <i>Lord Jesus Christ</i> (SP:192) | 2 <i>There is a Redeemer</i> (CH:559) |
| | 3 <i>Prayer is the soul's sincere desire</i> (CH:546) |
| 4 <i>Praise, my soul</i> (CH:160) | 5 <i>Put all your trust in God</i> (CH:270) |

In the Name of the Father and of

We human beings have always been prone to using minds in unfortunate ways: we choose to fall back on badly founded assumptions as though they were facts. We rush to judgment as though that's the only speed available to us. We say we have strong opinions, when sometimes we might only be one small step away from bigotry of the worst kind. And this isn't a modern tendency. It's always been so.

How, you might wonder, do I know that this is a long-standing problem? In response to that question I would direct you to today's Bible reading from the very start of John's gospel. There we find Jesus calling disciples. Having brought Andrew and Simon on board the day before, Jesus has moved on to two more prospective candidates for his travelling band of inner circle followers: one an easy catch; the other perhaps a bit more tricky to reel in.

In the person of Philip, Jesus seems to find a willing disciple, though we know nothing behind the circumstances of the call. Did the two men know each other? Did they live or work near to each other? Perhaps they grew up as friends – we simply don't know. All we are told is that Jesus said to Philip: 'Follow me.'

I wonder what went through Philip's head when he heard the call of Christ. Perhaps he had suspected for many years that the carpenter's boy was bound for something big. It's possible that he had heard him preaching many times in the synagogue and was flattered beyond words when Rabbi Jesus, this respected figure within the community, had come to him with an invitation to join him on the road. Presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this, there could be no doubt: even if the route and the destination each remained a mystery, you just wouldn't think of turning down an opportunity such as this. Yes. Perhaps that might be why Philip followed, but who is to say?

Then again, what if Jesus and Philip didn't have a close relationship? What if there was little or no backstory to be examined here? If that is how it was, I am even yet more than prepared to believe that a naturally charismatic personality such as Jesus of Nazareth might well be the kind of compelling character to make an open-minded stranger think: "I just can't say no – I've got to say yes!"

Philip may have known Jesus very, very well, or Philip may have been a complete stranger who proved sufficiently receptive to a simple yet utterly overwhelming call. Whatever the truth of it all, when Jesus said, 'follow me', Philip followed.

Our story moves on, and soon we find Philip moving on too. Here is what John's gospel tells us:

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.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

Oh, Nathaniel! Now there is a kind of person totally different to open, perceptive, adventurous Philip. Nathaniel – I strongly suspect – might well be the kind of bloke who knows what's what, and won't budge an inch. In particular, he knows that those people who come from the town of Nazareth are not "like us". It's the same old Glasgow/Edinburgh story which we know so well. It's Kirkwall/Stromness. It's Coatbridge/Airdrie. It's Ibrox/Parkhead. And in case you think I'm being a little parochial, let me tell you that it's also Sydney/Melbourne and for all I know it may be Washington/New York. Local rivalry is not limited to Scotland. It seems (so very sadly!) to be universal over time and space.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

If this Bible reading holds up a mirror to our human nature, it actually does something more: it holds out the most wonderful antidote to our own closed-mindedness. It would have been so easy for Philip to shrug his shoulders and respond negatively to his friend, but instead he pokes at Nathaniel with the most simple of all imaginable ripostes.

“Come and see,” says Philip.

If Nathaniel isn’t keen on Nazarenes, then he needs to be challenged if he’s ever going to meet this one. That “come and see” is so very powerful because in three tiny words it achieves as much as a lecture, and probably a whole lot more. A “come and see”, after all, is an invitation to move with another person in a new direction. Recall how Philip did not say, “go and see”, but “come and see”. There is a companionship at play here as Philip assures his pal that he’ll be right beside him in this.

So let’s see what happens. In that moment of introduction, Nathaniel is overcome by his encounter with Jesus, exclaiming: ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ And so we find someone moving – or rather, being moved – out of bigotry and towards trust in a new and life-changing relationship. All the inherited nonsense about bad Nazarenes falls away for Nathaniel as he comes with Philip … sees for himself … and finds a faith he would never have dreamed possible.

Some 20 centuries on, we find ourselves the ones with badly-founded assumptions about places and people and issues. I suspect, for example, that many people still have a deep-seated fear of foreigners: not the kind of foreigners who come as visitors, but those who come and stay with their foreign languages and their foreign food and their foreign clothing and their foreign customs. It may be OK for them, but … well … it’s just not us, is it?

To that kind of thinking we need to bring the words of Philip: “Come and see.”

Don’t simply stand back and be a cold, awkward, stranger. Come and see, and meet, and get to know, because it is in the relational that we find things changing: thoughts … feelings … presuppositions … us.

That’s one of the things I love about the “One World Nights” which Longniddry Church has hosted over the last decade (and which we hope and trust Longniddry Church will host again in the future). As well as presentations from our primary schools and music from Preston Lodge, we often have someone who comes to tell us their story. Most recently we got to meet Sabir Zazai, an Afghan asylum seeker who is now Chief Executive of the Scottish Refugee Council, based in Glasgow. I wonder if anyone who met Mr Zazai could be anything other than changed by their encounter. He is a remarkable human being who makes people think, and think again. If you missed that opportunity a couple of years back, I would simply say that when “One World Night” does eventually return … come and see.

In closing, let us return to where we started, as we consider this old-style bigot named Nathaniel. But really, let’s not be too hard on him. Not only are we ourselves a bit like Nathaniel; we also need to recognise that he has the courage to take the big step towards fresh encounter and new discovery. With Philip at his side he makes a difficult journey which, in the words of theologian Mary Luti, is a journey intended “to test his assumptions against experience”. She goes further, adding in this comment on the changing of Nathaniel: *He ... discovers that “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” is not the real question. The real question is, “Can anything good come out of me?” Amen.*

Praying for others

Lord, open our lives to your goodness.

Open our eyes to your presence. Open our ears to your call.

Open our hearts to your love. Open our lips to your praises.

It may not be Philip, but another, who says to us “Come and see.”

We are not Nathanael, but another, distant from him in time and space.

Yet when someone says to us “Come and see”, may we do as Nathanael did and accept a friend’s invitation to meet Jesus, our Lord, our Master and our Saviour.

In these most difficult and fearful times, open our hearts with compassion for the many dispossessed refugees who are fleeing Afghanistan and other places.

They are driven by war and need,

full of fear and desperation.

We pray that our leaders will find ways to accept those people who have no other hope.

When some come among us may we all play some part in welcome.

If we were like them, how we would long for shelter and safety.

Lord, this week we read of and sorrowed for the deaths in Afghanistan of two young boys, Binyameen and Arveen, killed in an act of war.

We pray that such things may cease and
that the nations of the world may speak peace and not war.

Bless us here in our community that we may be open to your infinite compassion,
channelling some small stream of your unbounded love.

In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers museum pieces:

Like many of us, I have whiled away lockdown evenings watching various programmes on TV. I have to say, the streaming and catch-up services are great. I don't know how I survived without them before. I particularly like BBC iPlayer. I love the fact I can join a programme late and still watch it from the beginning. And I can then pause it whilst I make a cup of tea. It's fab.

One programme I have recently been watching is *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*. In each episode we follow the story of the conservation, or preparation for exhibition, of items in the V&A Museum in London. It's fascinating. The enthusiasm of the curators and conservators is wonderful. The skill of the latter humbling. I recently watched an episode where they were preparing to exhibit some of the many pictures of rainbows made by children during lockdown. Millions of them were displayed in people's windows. Two things struck me. The first is that the museum recognised this was a key cultural movement and they wanted to reflect on it but, more importantly, preserve the works for posterity. Who would have thought these pictures would have become historical artefacts?

The second thing that struck me was the conservator. This is a man who usually works on old masters. But he showed the same delicate touch and care for the preservation of these modern children's pictures as if they were Picassos. I found it very touching. He did say he didn't usually work with so much glitter and needed to be very careful to clear his bench before he worked on a Rembrandt! I rather like the idea of a Rembrandt acquiring a bit of glitter – a connection between then and now.