

# **Epiphany 2 2024 April Beckerleg**

## **1 Samuel 3.1-10 [11-20]**

## **Revelation 5.1-10**

## **John 1.43-end**

We are deep in the heart of Epiphany season. A time where we are thinking about where we might find God. And it seems to me that we have two stories of God helping people to discover something about themselves in unexpected ways. Stories of men who had their assumptions challenged, and were gracious enough to allow this to transform themselves and how they saw the world.

Perhaps the most obvious one was Nathaniel, whose unpromising start to his faith journey was rather blunt:

‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’

That’s quite a sentence. But perhaps if we are honest we can recognise that we all have the capacity to feel or think something like it even today - because it is rooted in the way we learn to make sense of the world, we observe people and categorise them based on the way they look, the way they speak, the choices they make, and yes, where they come from.

And the thing is, Nazareth would have seemed like a pretty unlikely place for the Messiah to come from - Because it was tiny and rural and out of the way and ultra observant to Jewish rules and rituals, in contrast to the larger, more cosmopolitan towns in the area like Sephoris or Cana.

And I think if we had been there with Nathaniel we might have felt the same way about an itinerant rabbi from Nowheresville Nazareth.

And what is beautiful about Philip is that he doesn’t try to persuade Nathaniel with clever arguments, or even win him over with stories about his own experience – he just says simply, ‘Come and see’. Philip understands that he is not in charge of telling Nathaniel what to think, he allows this to be Nathaniel’s own journey. In our language we might say he did not let his ego get in the way of seeing ‘this is not about me’ And we know don’t we, that each of us have our own understanding of God, and it does not all look the same. And I think this graciousness of Philip gave space for Nathaniel to come to his own understanding of Jesus.

And what is great about Nathaniel is that he was prepared to change, he was ready to have his assumptions challenged – and you know this is a great lesson for all of us. I hope that we have all had the experience of being surprised, of someone not behaving in the way we had expected, or having our assumptions challenged. I hope that has happened to all of us because it shows we are open to where God is leading us, because if someone said, no my first impressions are always true, no one can ever surprise me, my judgements are always right – I

think I would be a little worried. What happens when we truly and open heartedly respond to the call to 'come and see'?

Well, we know something about that here at St Nicolas, because our welcome is inclusive – openness is built into our DNA, and how we describe ourselves, open to God, open to each other and open to our community.

And we remember that being open does have its risks. Because being open brings with it the very real possibility of being changed by what and who we become open to. And change is not always easy, it can make us feel quite uncomfortable. It is a very human tenancy to like things the way they are. And yet we also know that we must change in order to come into the fulness of who we are, and what God has called us to be.

Let's take our Old Testament story as an example. We are used to seeing this as Samuel's story – God's call on his life which he learns to respond to, and yes, there is something precious about that. But there is an equally touching story here about the change that Eli undergoes. He is an important man, the priest in charge of the temple and responsible for teaching the young boy Samuel. But he doesn't take over, or tell him what he ought to think, (or interpret what Samuel heard God telling him) again we might say Eli did not let his ego get in the way, but instead he was able to say, 'this is not about me' and encouraged Samuel to discover God's voice for himself. And I wonder if we get an insight into Eli's journey to this through his encounter with Samuel's mother in the previous chapter.

Perhaps you remember when Hannah came into the temple distressed and weeping, praying in great anguish – and Eli immediately made an assumption about her and had a real go at her for being drunk. And what is lovely is that he, like Nathaniel had the grace to realise when he was wrong. And this acceptance leads to that extraordinary and beautiful prophetic song Hannah sings when she brings Samuel to serve in the temple, a song that almost certainly inspired Mary's song that we call the Magnificat. And I think we can give Eli credit for allowing this experience to change him from jumping to conclusions, and seeing what wonderful things can happen as a result. I imagine him reflecting and praying about this encounter, and allowing it to change his attitude, to the point that he was willing to step back, and allow himself to see that this young boy's experience of God's voice was as valid as his own, (even when it contained some quite unwelcome news).

So yes, this is a story of a young boy discovering his vocation, but it is also a story that shows that we are all work in progress, that experiences can always teach us more about where we see God, and how we are to be in the world. That wherever we are on our faith journey, God can still surprise us, experiences can still teach us more about God, as well as being shown where we need to change and grow, and help us to celebrate the gifts we see in others.

Nathaniel and Eli were prepared to be surprised, to re evaluate, and perhaps this Epiphany we too might allow ourselves to see the wonders of how God is at work in the world with a fresh perspective, because the whole message of Epiphany is well maybe things are not as we expect them to be, and that is OK. That noticing, that listening, challenging our assumptions might just change our lives and the lives of those we encounter.

Where can we find God? Come and see.

I love one of the commentaries I read this week which includes this sentence:

The best days of God's people are not behind us, with the exodus and Sinai and the promised land. No, the best are still to come, with yet more prophets, and an entire world redeemed. God's people cannot be known for our nostalgia. We must be known for our hope.