

## An Israelite indeed

15 1 12

Almighty God,  
in Christ you make all things new:  
transform the poverty of our nature  
by the riches of your grace,  
and in the renewal of our lives,  
make known your heavenly glory.

My text is from the King James Bible translation of today's gospel according to St John chapter 1 and verse 47: **'Behold an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile!'**

Sometimes we can be spoilt for choice. I guess Christmas is like that with so much for us to choose from. But now it's January and as we move through Epiphany towards Candlemas and Lent, good things like the hours of daylight are limited. Not so today with our readings: I'd love to preach on the passage from 1 Samuel 3, the boy Samuel's first personal encounter with God. But I can't. Our church is dedicated to St Bartholomew and the gospel passage about Nathaniel's call to be one of the twelve is the most significant moment of his life.

You must know by now that Matthew, Mark and Luke all call Bartholomew by his surname – very public school and just like my grammar school when I was a boy! Alone, John refers to him by the name he was given at his circumcision – Nathaniel. But Bartholomew and Nathaniel are one and the same person: two

names, one guy. So Nathaniel Bartholomew meets Jesus and his life finds the fulfilment he has been seeking by his choice to follow his Rabbi, even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, his and our Lord.

How ? Well the opening chapter of John's gospel is a recognition of Jesus as the Word of God made Flesh; the Lamb of God come among us. Not everyone did or does but for those who do, the experience is transformational. So we see John the Baptist acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah; we see Andrew discovering Jesus for himself and bringing his brother Simon Peter to meet Jesus; and here, Philip is called to follow Jesus and immediately seeks out his friend, Nathaniel, to share the good news with him.

The dialogue is fascinating. I quote it in full, uninterrupted, from the NRSV which you heard David read to us:

P We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.

N Can anything good come out of Nazareth ?

P Come and see.

J Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit !

N Where did you come to know me ?

J I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you

N Rabbi you are the Son of God ! You are the King of Israel

J Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree ? You will see greater things than these. Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven

opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Philip is excited. He has met Jesus. Jesus has called Philip to follow him. And Philip does. But first he goes to share the good news with his friend. He tells Nathaniel that he personally has met the one they have all been waiting for: the Messiah whom Moses and the prophets had foretold. And he tells Nathaniel the Messiah's name – **Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth**.

If like his friend, Philip, Nathaniel is equally excited, he doesn't show it. We know Philip like Andrew and Peter come from Bethsaida. Nathaniel, however, comes from Cana which is situated even nearer to Nazareth and I guess for him Nazareth is a particularly unimpressive place and hence his cynical comment: **Can anything good come out of Nazareth ?**

Philip knows his friend well and doesn't bother to argue with him but simply invites him to come and see for himself. This they do.

When they find Jesus, it's Jesus who speaks first and he sums up Nathaniel to a T: **Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit !** What Jesus says is that Nathaniel is the genuine article; the real thing without 'guile'; a proper, kosher Jew; someone for whom Judaism is the informing light of his life. And Nathaniel recognises himself in what Jesus says of him.

But Nathaniel being Nathaniel has to ask how come you know me so well.

So Jesus tells him. Nathaniel's exact question is 'where' and Jesus reply under a fig tree seems a bit ordinary for Nathaniel to be so profoundly convinced . Now it could literally be true, Nathaniel could literally have been sitting under a fig tree when Philip came to tell him about Jesus. But the clue to a more profound, figurative meaning (if you'll forgive the unintended pun!) may be found in our icon that Karen wrote for us in the summer. Karen in her explanatory notes tells us that Nathaniel is profoundly rooted in Judaism which is indicated by the border of fig leaves which surround the ground on which he stands. If the fig tree represents Judaism, the prosperity and well-being of the Promised Land given to the Children of Israel, then this link may help to explain the significance in Mark (11 v12 - 14) of the fig tree outside Jerusalem condemned by Jesus for its failure to bear fruit.

Whatever the underlying meaning of Jesus' words, they have a profound effect on Nathaniel who makes a confession of faith here at the start of John's gospel that is echoed by that of Thomas at the end of that gospel. Nathaniel says **Rabbi you are the Son of God ! You are the King of Israel** – Thomas says, **My Lord and my God** (20 v28)

So there we have it. Epiphany is about the manifestation, the revelation of God to his people through his Son Jesus and in today's gospel we see the saint in whose name our church is dedicated recognise the fact of who Jesus is. May that be true for us too.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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H: Sermon 25: Israelite

