

# Sermon for Epiphany 2 yr B

The Text: John 1:43-51

Nathanael said to Jesus: ‘How do you know me?’ Jesus answered and said to him: ‘Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.’

Quite a stunning statement by Jesus, isn’t it? Imagine Nathanael, being taken to meet Jesus; he’s never come across Him before, and while he is still approaching, *Jesus sees him*, and greets him: ‘Behold a true Israelite in whom no conceit is found.’ If you were Nathanael, you’d be puzzled, wouldn’t you, maybe even confused. ‘How do *you* know *me*?’ Then Jesus’ staggering answer: ‘Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.’

With Jesus’ declaration to Nathanael—‘Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree’—Jesus reveals Himself to Nathanael, and to us, as the Son of God, who knows all things. Jesus reveals Himself as the God who the Psalmist worships in Psalm 139, our Psalm for today: “You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

Have you ever thought about your closest relationships with others? The closer we are to someone, the better they know us—know what we like, what we need, what will be of help. But the irony of closeness and intimacy in relationships means an increased vulnerability. We don’t want to drag out the skeletons in our closet with those we know well, do we? We don’t want the dark past, or our failings, or things we’ve said about others, or our embarrassing moments, or our secret thoughts found out. Because we don’t want to be hurt; we don’t want to ward off those who are close to us. And so, we maintain a ‘safe distance’, and keep all those things hidden away from others. Because we just know that if they were ever found out, our families, our friends, our Pastor and others in the church, our employers and work colleagues, our schoolmates would be horrified. And the conclusion we draw is, we’d lose them.

We know all too well, don't we, the battle for the conscience. Satan uses all these things we lock up in our 'good reputation safety vault'. We hear from Zechariah 3:1 and Revelation 12:10 that he stands at our right side and uses all these things to accuse us before God, *day* and *night*. Is he right to do so? Yes! Absolutely! He knows God's Law better than we do, and he happily points out all the ways we've failed God. But where he steps over the mark is with condemnation like: you're lousy, there's no way God could love *you*, no way He would want to use someone like *you*...you call yourself a Christian?!

Sound familiar? It's easy to listen to that and adopt it into our thoughts. Have you ever thought that God isn't really with you, that it's impossible for God to love you? Have you ever felt like that?

Philip was from the little town of Bethsaida, which means 'house of fishing', and which was east of the Jordan. No reason is given as to why Jesus sought Philip, where Jesus found him, nor how He knew Philip. With Nathanael, we know even less, other than that he was an Israelite and was sitting under a fig tree. Compared to other characters in the Bible, he's a 'nobody'. He's done no great spiritual feats or led a life of spiritual excellence...otherwise, surely, there would be some mention of it in Scripture. In fact, he's only mentioned once more in John's Gospel, in 21:2.

But while we know little or nothing about these disciples...Jesus knew *everything* about them. He knew everything about the other two disciples mentioned just before our text for today: Andrew, and Simon Peter. But that's not what is astonishing about today's text—after all, Jesus is God and what is astonishing, astounding, simply incomprehensible is that even though Jesus knows all things about these people, out of His sheer grace, he still calls them and uses them.

These people are not special or worthy in anyway; they are everyday people with everyday jobs. They are in the same need of repentance, of turning to God with their sin that John the Baptist had earlier proclaimed...just like me and you. Like every human being they too are sinners. Remember, Simon Peter was the one who later would deny our Lord three times.

Which one of these characters do you see yourself as? Perhaps you see much of those characters in yourself; in your own faith life: perhaps that your prayer life isn't quite right, or that you fall in the battle against sin too often, or that your

faith doesn't seem as alive and dynamic as that of your friends, or that you don't understand the Bible enough, or that you don't seem to be bearing much spiritual fruit. And maybe you draw the conclusion: 'There's no way God could ever love me. There's no way He would ever want to use someone like me.'

After Nathanael's praise of Jesus: 'Rabbi, You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel', Jesus promises that he will see 'even greater things.' What are these 'greater things'? The miracles to follow, like changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana? The rescuing of the royal official's son from the brink of death? The healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda? The feeding of the five thousand? These are certainly great things. It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be a first-hand eyewitness to miracles like that. But the greater things of which Jesus promises are heaven being opened and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Jesus' self-proclaimed title 'Son of Man' is in connection with the revelation of Heavenly glory in His own being. More particularly is the thought that this glory will begin to shine out in a final way when He is lifted up on the Cross. Christ Himself is the link between Heaven and Earth, thus Jesus' words convey the imagery of the angels ascending and descending upon Jacob's ladder.

Jesus does not just proclaim this to Nathanael. The 'you' here is specifically a plural address. This promise is to each one of you. It is through Christ crucified that no barrier exists between Heaven and Earth. It is through Christ crucified that the heavens are permanently opened, for you.

Jesus knows everything about you. He formed every intricate detail of your being while you were still in your mother's womb, through the power of His word. He knows all of your hopes, all of your longings, your pain, your sufferings. As He did with Philip, Jesus took the initiative to seek for you, and to call out to you: 'Follow me.' He was faithful to His Father's will, and came from Heaven to Earth to suffer and die to completely pay for every single one of your sins, that the heavens would be opened to you, so that you can have access to your Heavenly Father, and His forgiveness for all your sins, and His peace for your troubled consciences.

Jesus knows everything about you. He knows your weaknesses; He knows the ways in which you will fail Him in the future. He knows that Satan will be accusing you. So, He didn't die on the Cross to only save you, but then leave you to your own means to stumble through life the best way you know how. He gives you the strength you need just to make it from day to day. He sought you and called you in your baptism: 'Follow me'; follow me into new life and victory over sin, death, and the devil. His call 'Follow me' is living and active, wooing you, creating a will to do so, through His word. His word that is not just a guiding principle to life, but actually creates new life and grows in you to salvation, the promise in Romans and 1 Peter. He says "Keep following me" as He leads you to receive the forgiveness of sins, peace, and strength for your life through His body and blood shed for you.

So as Jesus leads and guides you, follow Him into all the troubled communities and relationships that He would have us go. And God who is able to do immeasurably more than we can even ask for or imagine will continue to work in you and through you, as you serve as His messengers and workers of good deeds. And the next time you hear the accusation and condemnation of the devil, look at your baptism certificate hanging on the wall, and if its not there, dig it out, and join with Luther in shouting: "I am baptized!" And the next time that doubts about God's love for you and His purpose for you trouble your conscience, rejoice that the greater things promised to Nathanael are those which you have seen; the heaven being opened to you in the person of Christ, so that as you eat His flesh and drink His blood, you can join with Simeon and sing "Today my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people." Amen.