

18th January 2015

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **32** **“Meet and right it is to sing”**
 666 **“Master, speak! Thy servant heareth”**
 673 **“Will you come and follow me if I but call your name”**
 660 **“Called by Christ to be disciples”**

READINGS: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10
 John 1:43-51

“WHERE DID YOU GET TO KNOW ME?”

I am a governor at one of our local Primary Schools – St Luke’s Church of England Primary School – located incidentally on Radnor Street. Wesley’s Chapel used to have a school and mission there on that same road – that is where our hall gets its name from – the Radnor Hall.

St Luke’s is an excellent school with a growing reputation. It has a motto both for the students and the staff –“doing the best I can for the world and for me.” The Head and the staff urge the pupils to be all that they can be. The teachers know their pupils individually, their strengths and their weaknesses, their temperament and their family background. The aim of the school is to develop the potential of every child and one sees the fruits of this – confident, articulate and polite children. One class was here to sing for our City Carol Service in December and we saw those qualities in the children.

Releasing the potential of young people is what schools are about and it is what St. Luke’s works hard to do. By a fortunate coincidence, Jasmine who has just read our Scripture passage from John is a graduate of St. Luke’s and one of whom they are very proud.

At the heart of that reading was the man Nathanael. His name means ‘given by God’ yet from what we read it seems that he did not have a clue about the meaning of God, or the role that God might play in his life. Yet his encounter with Jesus caused a great shift in his life and released the potential in him.

Let us set all this in context. Jesus was at the outset of his ministry and he was gathering together a band of co-workers – those who we know as his disciples.. Some of those who accepted his invitation to become disciples had been disciples of John the Baptist. They readily identified Jesus as the one about whom John had spoken. They left their tasks and their homes and followed Jesus eagerly. We know that Simon Peter and Andrew left their jobs as fishermen on Lake Galilee to become Jesus’ disciples.

When Jesus went to Galilee he also found Philip from Bethsaida, the same town that Simon Peter and Andrew came from – so he called Philip and Philip followed him gladly and without question. Philip was so excited and enthused by his meeting with Jesus that he went off to tell his friend, Nathanael, all about it.

Nathanael was singularly unimpressed. He was even contemptuous of what Philip was saying to him. When Philip tells his friend that he has found the one, Jesus of Nazareth, about whom Moses and the prophets had written, Nathanael's response is, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael was totally sceptical about what Philip was saying so begins by doubting that any person from the backwoods village of Nazareth can be the one about whom Moses had written.

Nathanael is just not interested in responding in responding to Philip's enthusiasm let alone to becoming a disciple of this Jesus. Interestingly Philip does not try to argue with Nathanael, does not try to convince him out of his prejudice. All Philip says is, "well, Nathanael, why not just come with me and see for yourself."

So we read that as Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him he says, "here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Well, just imagine yourself in Nathanael's position. You are going to see Jesus reluctantly, because you have been invited by a friend. You are totally sceptical about the credentials of this man, Jesus, a man from this backwater called Nazareth that no prophet ever spoke about.

Then as you approach Jesus – man you have never seen or spoken to before, he addresses you directly and speaks knowledgeably about you. Well you and I would be taken aback and Nathanael was taken aback, too. "Where did you get to know me?" He asks Jesus – and one can just imagine the tone of his voice and the look on his face – part amazement, part fear, part awe. And the power of Jesus' personality and the depth of this sudden encounter impact on Nathanael. From being a sceptic about this wandering preacher from Nazareth, Nathanael declares him to be the Messiah, -"you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel," he says.

This call of Nathanael is not the only instance in the gospels when someone acknowledges who Jesus is because they realise that they are known by Jesus in a way that they never anticipated, in a deep and compassionate way.

Do you recall the story of the woman at Jacob's well? Jesus met her there in the heat of the day and asked for a drink of water. She was something of an outcast from her community because of her chequered marital history.. and she was a Samaritan, a member of that group with whom Jews had no dealings. She was reluctant to talk to Jesus but when he revealed that he knew all about her history and still wanted to have water from her, the whole scene changed. Her encounter with Jesus her being known by him, liberated her to be a new person and an articulate witness for Jesus to her own people.

In the story of the Samaritan woman and in the Nathanael story there are three dimensions which speak to us today.

Firstly, there is 'invitation' – Nathanael was invited to 'come and see' and we, too, are invited to meet Jesus. It is an open invitation – 'come and see', 'come all you who are weary and heavy laden', and 'allow the little children to come to me.' Despite what critics of Christianity say the heart of the faith is not compulsion, not irrational argument, not brainwashing but an invitation – an invitation to come and meet Jesus in a personal encounter. Just as one person cannot force another to love them for that would be a contradiction in terms – so God in Christ does not force himself upon

us. At the core of our faith, as at the core of Nathanael's change of heart, is an invitation which can be accepted or rejected – an invitation to meet with Jesus.

Secondly is the matter of being known. Nathanael engaged with Jesus when he discovered that Jesus knew him. The woman at the well felt liberated to engage with Jesus when she knew that he knew all about her past and that there was nothing to hide.

Whether we know God or not, whether we engage with Jesus or not – we are known by God. The depth of this knowledge is put in a poetic way by the Psalmist. "it was you God who formed my inward parts, you who knit me together in my mother's womb."

God knows us better than we know ourselves. God, like teachers in a good school, knows our strengths and our weaknesses, knows our potential and seeks to pre-empt that potential within us. We may find this daunting – there is no where we can flee from God – even if we go to the depths of the seas. We may find God's knowledge of us daunting but it is also liberating. God wants to unlock our potential despite our weaknesses and shortcomings. When Jesus recruited his disciples he knew what he was getting – not angels, not people without fault but the Peters and Andrews of this world who would fall asleep when Jesus needed support, who would run away and even deny that they knew Jesus.

God invites and God knows us – better than anyone else on earth knows us, better than we know ourselves. God sees not only what we are but what we can be. In the light of the Psalmist's words we can only really know the wonder of who we are when we come to know the one who knows us.

Being called to be a disciple of Christ is not being called to something against our nature, it is being called to recognise what we are and what we can be is all part of what we were from our very beginning.

Thirdly is the matter of being promised more than we can ever imagine. When Nathanael expresses his amazement at Jesus' knowledge of him, Jesus replied, if you will allow me to put it colloquially, "Nathanael, you ain't seen nothing yet!" What Jesus meant, of course, was that as Nathanael joins the band of disciples he will see and understand so much more in the coming years. He will experience Jesus healing, telling parables, preaching and teaching and he will struggle to understand why Jesus persists in going to Jerusalem where he knows what will happen to him.

And this is true for us, too. If we are willing to follow Jesus we have so much more to experience – the fulfilling of our own potential and contributing to the life of the Kingdom.

To help children at St. Luke's School realise their potential all sorts of people are invited into the school to share their life stories in what are known as 'dream catcher assemblies.' In much the same way we as Christians have the whole family of the saints to show us what God can do through the lives of ordinary people, not just the well-known saints but the ordinary people who have been inspirational Sunday

School teachers or youth club leaders, or people giving up their time to work for charities.

So may we, like Nathanael, accept Christ's invitation to follow him, learn to know ourselves as He knows us and be prepared to see ever more amazing things, more than we could ever dream of –as we follow the path of discipleship.

Master, speak! Thy servant heareth,
Waiting for thy gracious word
Long for the voice that cheereth;
Master, let it now be heard.
I am listening, Lord for thee;
What hast thou to say to me?