

Epiphany 2

17th January 2021

1 Samuel 3. 1-20

John 1. 43-51

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Poor little Samuel; lying there in the temple in all his childish innocence, eager to please. Only to be given a word of judgement for his mentor and teacher Eli. Eli’s sons, while also priests, were corrupt and led what could only be called debauched lives. They had been trusted with the role of priest but had abused that trust.

The challenging thing about the call of God is that it is so often a call to bring a word of judgement or a call to repentance. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, particularly among the prophets, there is a tension between the prophets who bring the difficult word and those tame, court prophets who even in the face of looming destruction, insist that God is on their side. In our own time all those American evangelicals who have insisted that God is on their side are blind to the injustice and inequality in the American way of life and the violence which undergirds the prosperity of the few. In the past fortnight we have seen the rot begin to come to the surface. Where will it end everyone seems to be asking?

Too often, those who write histories write them from the perspective of the winners – often with the tone that the writer, or the victors they are connected with, were somehow destined to prevail. A sort of manifest destiny. Winston Churchill said: *History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.*

The strange thing about the four Gospels is that they are written from the perspective of people who didn’t understand, who were frightened and, ultimately, who denied and betrayed Jesus. Although the Gospels are not written as history, they do tell the story of these followers of Jesus who just did not get it.

Yet, here at the beginning of John’s Gospel is Nathaniel, “one in whom there is no deceit”. Nathaniel seems to understand. We don’t hear much about Nathaniel as a disciple, in fact he is not even listed a disciple in the gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke, nevertheless he appears as one who seems to understand.

Jesus says he sees Nathaniel sitting under the fig tree. In ancient Hebrew iconography the fig tree is a symbol of the law. Here we have one of John’s images which on the surface doesn’t seem to make much sense but when we understand it as symbol it becomes quite clear. So, Nathaniel sits under the law – he has given his life over to this discipline, but unlike so many of the scribes and pharisees in the Gospels who are followers of the law, Nathaniel is a disciple of Moses and the prophets in whom there is no deceit. He is not legalistic and hypocritical, nor hostile to Jesus, but humble, curious, open to the wisdom of God. And so, he is open to Jesus, even though Jesus comes from Nazareth, on the wrong side of the tracks.

In the church we lay great store by stories of dramatic conversations of people who might formerly have been hostile to the life of God: former addicts, communists, violent people. But

here at the beginning of John's Gospel we are introduced to people who are seekers, curious and already open to the life of God and the way of the Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of Paul we find that many of those who become followers of The Way are already people who were attracted to Judaism but could not become full Jews. They are already seekers and they recognise in Jesus' way the opening to the pathway which leads to God.

Often our hopes for newcomers in the church is for people to join and become like us. But what if we, open to the spirit, would be able to say to other seekers: come and see! And together, we become seekers of the way. To be an evangelist is to be a bearer of good news. Unfortunately, the term has been hijacked and its meaning narrowed to the point of being a scandal. Whoever bears the word of God in the pattern of Jesus whether in word or deed is an evangelist, bringing the kingdom of heaven near. All of us can be this.

We are anxious about the future of the church. Evangelism in truth is not about converting people but making space to be able to join others along the way together on the path toward God. We can pray for the openness of Nathaniel to a refreshing openness to new ways of seeing the life of God around us and in our midst.

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