

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for this Sunday

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;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 17th January 2021

A reading from the book of 1 Samuel 3:1-20

The LORD Calls Samuel

³ The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.

² One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, "Here I am." ⁵ And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

⁶ Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

"My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

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¹¹ And the LORD said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. ¹² At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. ¹³ For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God,¹⁴ and he failed to restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.””

¹⁵ Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, ¹⁶ but Eli called him and said, “Samuel, my son.”

Samuel answered, “Here I am.”

¹⁷ “What was it he said to you?” Eli asked. “Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.” ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, “He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes.”

¹⁹ The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. ²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reading from the Gospel of John 1:43-end

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”

⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

⁴⁶ “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

⁴⁸ “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

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Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

⁵⁰ Jesus said, “You believe^u because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” ⁵¹ He then added, “Very truly I tell you,^u you^u will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’^u the Son of Man.”

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection from Revd Robert Dolman, member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter

We know that Rupert Brooke, the First World War poet, thought Grantchester was in a different league from other local villages. He could not forget its peace and quiet, the beauty of the elms and the shady chestnut trees, the golden corn fields, the brook and the mill, and the straightforwardness of the men and women and the attractiveness of the little children who lived there. He remembered with pleasure glancing at the Church clock standing at ten to three and relishing honey to come at tea time.

Go-compare could have found no other village to match its charms: ‘Barton men make Cockney rhymes And Coton’s full of nameless crimes And things are done you’d not believe At Madingley on Christmas Eve.’ That spirit of local rivalry is even now not quite dead. I can imagine some seasoned worthy from Toft muttering, ‘Can any good thing come out of ? – well, finish the sentence for yourself.

Nathanael was in this sceptical frame of mind when his friend Philip began to wax enthusiastic about a new teacher he had met. Philip claimed excitedly, ‘We have found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. He is called Jesus and he is the son of Joseph from Nazareth.’ Nathanael, who came from Cana in Galilee, could not imagine anything more improbable than that such a tinpot little place should be the springboard for any genuine spiritual movement. So, he asked dismissively, ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Come off it, Philip’

Philip invited Nathanael to experience the compelling power of Jesus; come and see for yourself. And as he approached Jesus the wind was rather taken out of Nathanael’s sails. Without any introduction, Jesus immediately commended Nathanael as a genuine Israelite, one in whom there was no deceit, no guile. Nathanael was not like the tricky religious leaders with whom Jesus would clash so frequently and so bitterly. Neither was he like the father of Israel, the patriarch Jacob, a rather dodgy character who cheated his elder brother Esau out of his birthright

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and out of the blessing of their old father, Isaac. No, Nathanael was a true Israelite, an ardent searcher of the scriptures with a deep faith. Jesus read the secrets of his heart and saw in him a man truly enlightened and dedicated to God.

Nathanael naturally wanted to know why Jesus had formed this opinion of him. Jesus said that already before Philip had come on the scene he had watched Nathanael sitting under the fig tree. Many houses in Israel would have had a fig tree growing outside and the spacious canopy provided an extra room and this was a private place traditionally associated with pondering the scriptures, and with prayer.

Nathanael was deeply moved by what Jesus said about him. His prejudice melted away and he spontaneously blurted out, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.' In that moment the eyes of a true Israelite were opened to see the glory of the one who was to be God's new Israel.

But who was Nathanael? He does not appear at all in Matthew, Mark or Luke. And in St John from this encounter at the beginning of Jesus' ministry right through to the Crucifixion there is no further mention of him. But then all of a sudden he reappears. In St John ch 21 the evangelist records how Jesus made his third resurrection appearance by the Sea of Tiberias and amongst those present were Simon Peter, James and John, Thomas and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee.

Nathanael who stood by the lakeside among the leading apostles must have been amongst the close followers of Jesus. A long tradition identifies him with the disciple Bartholomew. This is possible since Bartholomew is a kind of surname, meaning son of Tolmai: so, was Nathanael, son of Tolmai? Whether that's so or not Nathanael had, as Jesus promised, seen greater things. He had seen Jesus at work in the power of the Spirit in the towns and villages of Galilee. He had witnessed the electrifying power of his preaching to the ordinary people who heard him so gladly: he had heard his announcing of God's kingdom in mind-blowing parables; his call to repentance, a change of mind and life; his forthright confronting of the political and the religious authorities; his radical questioning of conventional ideas; his stabbing new insights into scripture; his embracing of a leper; his hospitable welcome to publicans and sinners; his friendship with women, his valuing of little children. Nathanael had seen people's lives changed, watched them give up their cherished securities and material wealth to follow Jesus. He had seen the shedding of tears as the words of Jesus penetrated deeply into hearts and minds, assuring people that the sins that had disfigured their lives were forgiven and wiped away. He had seen the spontaneous joy of those whose darkened minds had been enlightened and the new freedom of those whose crippled bodies had been made straight or whose blind eyes had been opened. Yes, Nathanael had seen greater things.

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But there was much more. He had perhaps been near enough to the events on the hill called Calvary to hear passers-by taunting the dying Jesus, chanting the refrain, 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross,' and the priests and the scribes and the soldiers all mocking him, 'If you're the King of the Jews, come down from the Cross and save yourself.' And did Nathanael get near enough to read the inscription on the Cross, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, the title he himself had used in that first encounter?

Certainly the words that Jesus said to him, 'You will see greater things than these,' had been fulfilled. One contemporary theologian has written, Our truest picture of God is the crucifixion of Jesus. For the rest of his life Nathanael pondered its meaning. Jesus told Nathanael he would see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. There is an echo of Jacob here again. Jacob had dreamt of a ladder reaching up to heaven. But now the means of communication between heaven and earth is Jesus, the Son of Man, who came down to earth from heaven to draw all people by way of the Cross into the Father's heart.

And Nathanael was an amazed witness of the Resurrection. He learned that the love of God could not be finally defeated by death and that the grace of God was let loose in all the world. We don't know what part Nathanael played in subsequent events but we do see him as one of the first witnesses to the greatest things of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

But what does this story at the beginning of the Gospel say to us? We must face the reality that many people are asking a question rather like the one Nathanael did. Religion and its institutions have been pushed to the margins. It has been conventional wisdom that religious beliefs are matters for private individuals and should have no sway in the public square. Religious institutions are confidently believed to be destined for unstoppable statistical decline, and they are frequently discredited by the gross and abusive conduct of those entrusted with positions of leadership. They are increasingly ignored by the media, and understanding of what they are about grows thinner and vaguer by the year. Even some of their members are disillusioned by their performance. The Church seems, as Nazareth did to Nathanael, an unlikely source of truth, wisdom and power for modern people. Can any good thing come out of it? the cynic asks. And the cynic may be either the wiseacre in the village pub or the scientist or philosopher in the Senior Common Room.

This is a call for the Church to dig deeper, to be more thoughtful and more prayerful, more willing to explore the vast riches of Christ and to see clearly greater things in him than heart or mind have yet conceived. There is a case for saying that one major thing that is wrong with the Church at the moment is that it is desperately preoccupied with its own vital statistics, with its own very survival, rather than with the mystery of Jesus. We also have to venture beyond superficial respectability to something altogether more authentic, perhaps more disturbing. Giving real attention to other people in the form of love and giving real attention to God in the form we call prayer could make a real difference to our world. It would certainly make a real

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difference to us. We need to heed the call of Philip to come and see, and to claim the promise of Jesus that there are greater things yet to be seen.

If you want a simple phrase to sum it up, listen to this paragraph from 'The Last Battle', the conclusion of C S Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, which well describes the spiritual journey that Nathanael made: 'I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. Come further up, come further in.'

'Come further up, come further in.' See greater things. The invitation is for you and me – whether we live in Grantchester or even in Barton, Coton or Madingley.