

Epiphany 2: God sees the heart

I was at a regular Saturday evening prayer meeting of the youth group I helped to lead at St Thomas' Musgrave Rd, in Durban South Africa where I grew up. A small group of us would meet on Saturday evenings on the chancel steps in the church to pray. That evening we were laying hands on one another, pausing to listen to what the Holy Spirit might be saying and then offering intercession for the one who had asked for prayer. It came to be the turn of a fellow leader and I knew that there were some difficult and painful things going on in his life at the time. It would not have been appropriate to share this with the gathered youth. We laid hands on him. I must say that I was in some trepidation because I knew that what was going on was sensitive and I wondered what would happen? There was a pause. One of the younger youth began to pray a prayer that stunned me. In his words he ministered tenderly to the heart of the leader's issue, but from the words you'd *never* have known what the issue was. God was having a private conversation with my fellow youth leader through the words of a guileless young man. I experienced God in those moments as beautiful, kind, loving. God did not break confidentiality as God the Holy Spirit inspired the one who was praying. I have never forgotten this.

The conversation between Jesus and Nathanael is coded. They completely know what they are saying to one another, though we don't. Nathanael is so impressed with Jesus' knowledge that he immediately recognises in Jesus three significant titles: rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel. John is inexorably revealing to us who this man Jesus. A revelation that invites a response.

Jesus is not offended by Nathanael's straightforwardness, not in the slightest. He is delighted in him. Jesus affirms him. Jesus

reveals himself to Nathanael, and calls him to be a witness to the Son of God whom he has recognised.

Nathanael knows the Scriptures. Like all sorts of people in a time of difficulty, he is familiar with the promises of hope and salvation. Nazareth doesn't appear in any of the scriptures as being of significance in God's ways with Israel. Nazareth is in Galilee. Galilee in the north has traditionally been a place of more independence. Galilee under Roman occupation is a place of political radicalism and foment. Disturbance comes from there. 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?

Nathanael has kept abreast of history and news. He knows that many messiah's, religious independence movements, started in Galilee before being ruthlessly stopped. His opinion is not just prejudice.

Jesus understands Nathanael's scepticism. Welcomes it perhaps? He's as aware of the history as Nathanael is. Then the Son of God lasers to the heart of the matter. Here is a man of integrity. Jesus needs people like Nathanael to be his hands and feet and voice in the world.

The Son of God is not an island, in Donne's famous image. The Son of God needs friends and disciples to join him in the work of God. People like Nathanael. By no means perfect models of humanity. Ordinary, a bit ornery, even, but of pure heart, of good intention, of integrity are just the sort of disciples Jesus needs. Just the sort of disciples Jesus continues to seek today.

Just in case you're tempted to conclude from what I'm saying that Jesus is looking for holy and righteous people, don't! None of us are perfect, all of us are fallible, all of us fail, we make mistakes, we hurt others, ourselves, God's good creation. But Jesus sees to the very heart of a cynic in this story. A man jaded

by his circumstances. Jesus offers him hope and calls him to join in the mission.

Jesus connects Nathanael to the heart of their tradition, to the hope of their scriptures, in his Person: here before Nathanael is God the Saviour who is Jesus of Nazareth. And Nathanael, by God's gift of the Holy Spirit, recognises him: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel." Not Rome, not Herod, not any ruler, you, the carpenter, son of Joseph of Nazareth, nowhere's-ville.

Every disciple Jesus called was invited to turn from their failures, mostly failure of imagination, to trust that with them Jesus was able to do fulfil his mission. Nathanael has to turn from his cynicism and unbelief. He does. His conversation with Jesus brings him to faith that God is Jesus, that God is working out God's plan in Jesus of Nazareth. Hope is rekindled in Nathanael. By the gift of God, he believes and is on board.

Jesus finds Philip. Philip finds Nathanael. There's a pattern here. Jesus has found you. Jesus has found each of us, who by our baptism and confirmation, have put our hands up to be counted, have made a public confession of our faith.

We find others and invite them to come and see for themselves. Philip invited Nathanael, but Jesus encountered Nathanael in a way in which Nathanael understood and saw that Jesus was indeed God's Son, God's the Anointed, Saviour. The one who could forgive sins, the one who could reveal heaven.

This is our calling as disciples of Jesus, to invite others to come and see. Come and see who Jesus is to me. Come to the Quiz, the Barn Dance, the Skittles. Come to the Lent Course. Come to the church to light a candle. Come with us to worship. Come and see.

God the Holy Spirit continues to be at work among us. God the Holy Spirit was able to encourage and strengthen the faith of a beleaguered brother through the prayer of a young Christian. God was able to melt Nathanael's scepticism and cynicism and to meet him where he was, as he was, how he understood. God has met each one of us in ways that enabled us to turn to Christ and to follow him. We must trust God the Holy Spirit to continue that work in people we know. All we are asked to do is to bear witness to what we have seen and know and to invite others to come and see.

Pray.