

January 14 & 15, 2012 – Church of the Epiphany

- The Rev. Dr. Tim Perry

Jesus Calls

Last Sunday was the first Sunday of the Season of Epiphany. Translated into English, the word, “Epiphany” means simply, “to show” or “to make known.” And in the gifts of the Magi and the baptism by John, Jesus’ identity is disclosed. The gold, frankincense and myrrh, the water and the dove and the divine voice tell us that Jesus is Lord and King. And it is as such that he is made known to us.

During Epiphany, Christians are invited to ask just what difference the disclosure of Jesus makes. What has changed with his coming? What is being changed while we await his return? These are the questions we are invited to ask during Epiphany.

With that in mind, let us turn from an overview to the Gospel lesson for this morning. It is the story of the calling of Philip and Nathaniel, the conclusion to the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

As our story opens, Andrew and another disciple have just found Jesus. Jesus is so compelling, so convincing, so absolutely spell-binding that Andrew’s first action is to search out his brother, Simon to tell him about Jesus, the Messiah, the King of Israel and the Lord of God’s people.

Our Gospel lesson follows on.

While heading for the Galilee region, Jesus “finds” Philip. A small verb, “finds.” But one worth stopping and thinking about. Andrew and his companion were, because of the preaching of John, searching for Jesus. And they found him. And he called them.

Philip, on the other hand, was not a follower of John nor was he searching for the Messiah. The text does not tell us that Philip found the Messiah; the text says, rather, that the Messiah found him. That’s an important point to observe. When Jesus is made known, people are called, but the call is never cookie cutter. It’s never identical to the last one. Sometimes, people who are seeking find Jesus. At others, people are like Philip—Jesus finds them.

Although the manner of his call is different from Andrew’s, the result is the same. Just as Andrew ran to find Simon, so Philip ran to find Nathanael to tell him about the one who had found him. Nathanael, however, is unconvinced. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” he asks. It’s a fair question. Nazareth was so small a town that it simply isn’t mentioned in any literature outside the New Testament before the 9th century! But Philip will not be dissuaded. “Come and see for yourself.” He replies.

And Jesus, setting his eyes on Nathanael says: “Here’s an Israelite in whom there is no guile.” It’s a seeming validation of Nathanael’s previous comment. Nathanael’s unbelief is not cynical. It is not jaded. And he isn’t about to fawn over someone about whom he’s not convinced. Nathanael is the kind of unbeliever Jesus loves. He’s open about his unbelief. In it there is no shred of deceit or hypocrisy.

Nathanael, understandably, is put off by this kind of greeting. “Do you know me?” And Jesus answers, “Before Philip called you, while you were still sitting under the fig tree, I saw you.” And with those words, Nathanael’s straightforward scepticism melts.

Nathanael too becomes a believer. And Jesus promises that Nathanael will see even greater things. Just what things? The seven signs—the turning of water into wine, the healing of the nobleman’s son, the healing of the paralytic, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus walking on water, the healing of the blind man and the raising of Lazarus. The signs that each in their unique way would reaffirm what Nathanael has already confessed: that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel.

And all of these are wrapped up in and underscored by Jesus application of the imagery of Jacob’s dream to himself. He is the ladder that unites heaven and earth. He is the link that brings God’s blessings to God’s world.

Andrew is called and his first response is to bear witness to his brother. Philip is called and his first response is to bear witness to Nathanael.

And so it is appropriate here, to unpack just how the biblical motif of bearing witness works itself out here. In our time, and in our place. Three points suggest themselves.

First, **Jesus** calls. Jesus, in other words, is not only the object of Gospel proclamation. He is also the subject. He calls. Philip says to Nathanael, “ We have found Him whom Moses wrote about.” But it is Jesus who calls. It is Jesus who says, “Before Philip called, I saw you.” What makes disciples disciples is Jesus’ call.

What would change if we systematically went through every programme offered in our church bodies and asked, “Does this activity, does this programme, introduce people to Jesus? Does it point away from us and toward the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Does it bring people to Jesus and then, crucially, get out of the way?”

What might happen when we let Jesus do the calling? If the first chapter of John is any indication, things will get a little difficult. After all, the downside of letting Jesus call people is the fact that we surrender control. And Jesus just may start calling people that we don’t particularly like.

For, and this is the second point, Jesus calls all kinds of different people. Andrew and his unnamed companion were spiritual seekers. They had heard God's word in the preaching of John and when John sent them on to Jesus, they went. They were searching. They were eager. And, eventually, they found what they were looking for. Philip wasn't looking for a Messiah. He wasn't looking for anyone. He seemed simply to have been minding his own business until Jesus called him. Nathanael was not a believer. Nathanael's scepticism was open and honest. If there is a messiah, he said, then he certainly didn't come from that irrelevant little place called Nazareth. But Jesus saw him. Jesus chose him even before he met him. And he became a disciple, too.

Seekers and sitters and sceptics and Jesus called them all. There was no ideal disciple profile that he followed. He didn't wonder whether Andrew lived in the right neighbourhood or if Philip's kids went to the right schools. He didn't ask if Simon would vote for the right political party. And the Jesus who called indiscriminately in the first century does so today.

When we read the Gospels, when we read about the kinds of people Jesus called and the uproar that his associations caused among good religious folks like you and me, maybe we should pause and ask ourselves whether we really are ready to let Jesus do the calling. Who would come through those doors? Who are the Larch Street equivalents of Roman soldiers and tax-collectors, of sinners and the demon-possessed, the blind and the lame? Are you ready for them to come through the doors? Would they be welcome here?

While your thinking about that, I want finally to mention the third point about Christian witness. And it is this: you don't really have a choice. You don't get to choose whether Jesus will call and whom Jesus will call. Because called people bring people to Jesus. When John saw Jesus, he sent Andrew and his friend to him. After Andrew met Jesus, he ran for his brother so that he could meet him, too. Philip's response to Jesus' words, "Follow me" was to search out Nathanael and bring him. No deliberation is mentioned. No extensive evangelistic training exercises (again, there's nothing wrong with those). They simply pointed people to Jesus because they couldn't help it. It's what called people do. Called people bring people.

Does that mean Jesus wants us all to be street preachers? No. Does it mean he wants us all to try to be a Billy or a Franklin Graham? No. But clearly, the encounters that John and Andrew and Philip had with Jesus were so profound, so powerful, so life changing that they couldn't not tell anyone.

Maybe on this second Sunday of Epiphany, Jesus is calling here. Now. Perhaps he's calling someone who, like Andrew, has been spiritually searching for a long time. Perhaps he's calling someone like Phillip, who hasn't been searching at all. Perhaps he's calling a good-hearted, honest skeptic like Nathanael. Jesus' call will be different for each of you. There's no cookie cutter Christianising prayer in the Gospels. Jesus comes in different ways to different folks. And that's ok. But if Jesus is calling you—however he is doing it, whether it has been a long process or not, whether it has taken a conventional religious route, or not—if Jesus is calling you, it's time to start following him.