

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY

17 JANUARY 2021

YEAR B

“Philip said to him, ‘Come and see.’”

John 1:46

Illustration

Keith and Jim had been friends since school and the friendship strengthened as the years rolled past, until the company where Jim worked was investigated by the Inland Revenue and Jim was accused of fraud. The papers were so full of it that Jim hardly dared leave the house. All his friends except Keith melted away. Jim was distraught, terrified that he might be sent to prison and deeply ashamed. At that point, his wife left him, taking the children with her, and Jim contemplated suicide. Then Keith asked him, “Why don’t you come to church? It might help.”

“What on earth for?” retorted Jim. “No religious claptrap is going to sort out this mess.” But he went anyway. People were pleasant to him, treating him like a normal human being, and Keith helped him through the service. Jim did not understand much of the service and was unable to concentrate or to remember anything afterwards, but somehow it was a turning point in his life. Church became a lifeline for Jim which sustained him through his prison sentence and helped him to pick up his life again afterwards.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus did not directly call Nathanael to be one of the Twelve, he called Philip. It sounds from the Gospel reading as though Jesus actively sought out Philip to invite him to become one of the inner band of apostles, just as he had deliberately invited Andrew the previous day. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus calls people from their work to follow him, but here in John’s Gospel Jesus calls disciples of John the Baptist to change their religious allegiance in order to follow Jesus.

Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus and in today’s reading Philip seeks out his friend Nathanael, eagerly telling Nathanael that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah. But Nathanael is highly sceptical and laughs in Philip’s face. “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” he mocks, possibly using the words of a local proverb, since the people of Nazareth were universally despised. But despite his scepticism, Nathanael went with his friend and met Jesus.

As soon as Jesus spotted Nathanael he saw a young man who was straight and

honest and upright, someone who might be outspoken in his views but who bore no malice and who would be a loyal and faithful supporter.

Perhaps it was this characteristic of open transparency which Jesus saw in little children. When Jesus was teaching his friends about the kingdom of God, he told them that in order to enter the kingdom, they must receive it just like a little child (Mark 10:15).

And just as a little child is instantly trusting, so Nathanael immediately trusted and believed in Jesus, simply because Jesus told Nathanael that he saw him standing under the fig tree where Philip found him. But Nathanael was instantly aware that this was much more than a clever display of clairvoyance. Nathanael was conscious that Jesus actually knew him through and through, even though they had never met before. That was enough for Nathanael. He did not bother to ask questions or to hedge his response with a fall-back position in case he was wrong; he gave himself wholly to Jesus and became exactly what Jesus foresaw, a loyal and faithful supporter.

Nathanael is not mentioned in any other Gospel, but is thought to be the Bartholomew of the other three Gospels and of Acts. It may be that bar-Tholomew, son of Tholomew (or Tholmai), was a surname, much as Simon's surname was bar-Jonah, son of Jonah. Nathanael/Bartholomew went on to become a missionary, carrying news of Jesus to Syria and Asia Minor. He was eventually martyred in Great Armenia and remains the patron saint of Armenia today.

Application

Nathanael came to faith through his friend. Philip did not urge him or cajole him into following Jesus, but merely shared his own excitement and invited Nathanael to see for himself. Philip did no more; Jesus did all the rest. As soon as Nathanael met Jesus for himself, he believed.

As Christians, all we are required to do is to share our excitement about Jesus and invite our friends to come with us. Once they meet Jesus for themselves, they too may believe, for Jesus does all the rest. Jesus can see the potential within every person and can bring that potential to fruition. But he needs us to say to our friends, "Come and see."