

# Second Sunday of Epiphany

17th January 2021

## **Preparation**

O Lord, open our lips and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.  
Your light springs up for the righteous and all the peoples have seen your glory.

Blessed are you, Sovereign God, king of the nations, to you be praise and glory for ever.  
From the rising of the sun to its setting your name is proclaimed in all the world.  
As the Sun of Righteousness dawns in our hearts anoint our lips with the seal of your Spirit that we may witness to your gospel and sing your praise in all the earth.  
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Blessed be God for ever.

## **A Song of the Covenant**

1 Thus says God, who created the heavens,  
who fashioned the earth and all that dwells in it;  
2 Who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it,  
3 'I am the Lord and I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
4 'I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,  
5 'To bring out the captives from the dungeon,  
from the prison, those who sit in darkness.  
6 'I am the Lord, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other.

*Isaiah 42.5-8a*

Glory to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now  
and shall be for ever. Amen.

## **Readings**

### **Revelation 5:1-10**

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;  
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

## John1: 43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

### **Address: Invitations and Responses**

Having heard last week about the baptism of Jesus, this week we see him making some important decisions as he launches his ministry. Even Jesus was not able to carry out the work he was called to do without assistance, so he set about finding a suitable team of people to learn from him and support him.

And so today we heard about the call of Philip, followed by Nathanael. Jesus simply says to Philip, "Follow me," and there is no record of what he replied; just the inference that he responded immediately. But what we *are* told is that Philip was from Bethsaida, the same place as Andrew and Peter, who had already become disciples of Jesus. Although in the text Bethsaida is referred to as a city, in fact it was not much bigger than Madingley, and certainly no bigger than Girton, so you can imagine that these men probably knew each other pretty well already.

In the verses just prior to today's gospel we learn of Jesus' call to Andrew. He is the first man to become a disciple in John's gospel. He then goes to find his brother Simon, and he must have known his brother's thinking well enough to simply say to him, "We have found the Messiah." That was sufficient encouragement for Simon to come and see who this person was – and to have his name changed immediately to Peter.

Philip on the other hand, took a slightly different approach when he decided to share the news with Nathanael. He said, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote." Unfortunately, Philip's excited closing words almost ruined the invitation; he finished with, "He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nazareth too, was really just a small village, and little is known about it at all. It certainly did not figure in any of the OT prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. Nathanael's scornful response, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" might have discouraged a lesser man, but Philip knew his friend well enough not to try to argue with him, and just said, "Come and see."

As a result, we have one of the fascinating conversations between Jesus and one other person which John is so intent on recording in his gospel. As Jesus sees Nathanael approaching, he says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Within the space of one sentence Jesus says a huge amount, most of which might float over our heads. He not only knows that this man is Jewish – and many in that area north of Galilee had strong Greek connections, – but he also knows his character, revealing his ability to see into the heart of a person.

Jesus' slightly enigmatic statement which follows Nathanael's acclamation of him as, "Son of God! – the King of Israel!" also sheds light on his first comment. As he says that Nathanael will see, "the heaven opened, and the

angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man," those versed in the Scriptures would have known that Jesus was speaking about the experience of Jacob, who saw just such a vision, as the angels moved up and down a ladder which had been set up between heaven and earth.

Now Jacob was *not*, "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." In fact he was the one who had duped his twin brother Esau out of his birth-right, and the name "Jacob" means supplanter, or deceiver. However, after a later experience of spending a night wrestling with God, his name was changed to "Israel." So Nathanael, a true Israelite as a descendant of that flawed patriarch, also wrestled with God as he studied the Scriptures, and was a man who surpassed his forefather by being of total integrity.

And Jesus knew all this about him before meeting him for the first time.

John's Gospel constantly points to the importance of Scripture as the means by which we will see who Jesus really is. So here he is saying that Jesus himself becomes the connection between the realm of God, and the earth. Jesus is the one through whom God is making himself known in full.

Consequently, those who long for the coming of the Messiah, those early disciples, are portrayed as looking for, finding, and being found by Jesus. The question for them is whether they will move on from knowing Jesus as coming from Nazareth, whose father was apparently Joseph, to being able to acknowledge that Jesus is in fact the Son of God.

The first words Jesus speaks in this gospel are, "What are you looking for?" followed shortly afterwards by the invitation to potential disciples to, "Come and see." That invitation is issued by Jesus himself to Andrew, but then by Andrew to Peter, and Philip to Nathanael. Each of these disciples had a unique experience of finding and being found by Jesus. Similarly, we all come to faith in a huge variety of ways. God knows our different personalities and how he can break through to us. For some people the process takes years, like an oil tanker slowly changing course mid-ocean. Others experience a blinding flash of revelation like Paul on the road to Damascus. Some cannot remember a time when they did not believe in God, having known him since childhood.

Whatever form the call from God takes: powerful revelation; quiet nudge; a voice which speaks so quietly that we don't know when it first started to whisper to us; what is required of us in response is just that – to respond. To explore what this is all about. Those first disciples did not recognise Jesus for who he is for a very long time. But they were prepared to walk with him, talk to him, and ask him questions, and allow the light to slowly dawn on them. For us the journey to faith may be long-drawn-out; there is no shame in that. My journey is different from yours and yours from mine, because we are unique children of God, and he respects his creation. He doesn't force us into a mould which doesn't fit with our temperament.

It might also be a source of encouragement to realise that one of the main characters in today's gospel reading, Nathanael, may not have been a major member of that original group of disciples. He only appears one more time in this gospel, and in fact is referred to in the others by his patrimony, Bartholomew: Bar – son of; Tolmai. Bartolmai. Yet this one conversation with Jesus takes up more space than the record a few verses before of Jesus giving Simon the new name of Peter, the man who would become a leader of the early church. We all, however unimportant we feel, play an important part in the history of the church, and should not consider ourselves too insignificant to have any influence on others, the wider church, and the world in general. All we have to do, when we hear his invitation to follow him, whatever form it takes, is to respond.

## **Prayers**

Heavenly Father, who gave us all gifts and skills for the benefit of others, we thank you for the insight and dedication of the scientists who have developed the vaccine to combat the Coronavirus, and also the willingness of those who are now coming forward to carry out the process of inoculation as speedily as possible. We pray for all those who are working in our hospitals now, struggling to bring those who have succumbed to the virus back to health. Give them courage, energy and hope as they deal with increasing numbers of patients.

King of kings, Lord of lords, the only ruler of princes, we pray for the USA as the inauguration of the next President approaches. Bring safety, stability and an increasing recognition of the truth as the country finds its way towards a restored unity and healing.

We bring before you all who serve the church and are seeking a way through the fog of current restrictions to provide spiritual support to all in their care. Grant to all of us, whatever our standing, a sense of your call and a willingness to respond with eagerness, that we may find in you the inspiration, the strength and the hope we are seeking.

Lord of all mercy, we remember those who find the lockdown particularly difficult to bear: the recently bereaved; the lonely; the worried; those who suffer from mental illness of all kinds. Bring them comfort and encouragement, and the recognition that these difficult times will come to an end and free us all to enjoy the life you have given us.

We ask all of these things in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### ***Collect***

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 your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

### ***The Lord's Prayer***

### ***The Conclusion***

May Christ, who sends us to the nations, give us the power of his Spirit. Amen.  
Let us bless the Lord. Thanks be to God.