

Sermon 17th January 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139 1-5, 12-18

John 1 : 43-end

Let the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts bring us closer to you, O Lord. Amen.

Good morning, my name is Natasha and I'm a second year ordinand studying at St Mellitus. I'm delighted to be here with you this morning whether you're from St Peter's or wherever you may be watching from. You're very welcome!

Well, this is not how I envisaged preaching my first sermon of the year. But then so many things are different. Some of you may know that I teach English as a foreign language. Well, if you had told me a year ago I would be teaching English for 6 hours in a Zoom class I would have fallen off my chair laughing. But this is a New Year, a New beginning, new things to learn and new ways in which God is calling us.

So our Christmas was very different. Like most people's it was very quiet but actually very lovely. We were lucky enough to be joined by a dear friend who is part of our household bubble and so we organised a quiz. Each person had 10 questions to ask on a topic of their choice. Mine was famous film quotes from films, my youngest daughter did Christmas songs, my husband, did a 'where have I been?' Geography quiz, reminding us that travel was possible not too long ago! My eldest daughter, decided to do a power point quiz on biology, which felt more like a university lecture. And our lovely friend gave us the first lines of well known novels for us to guess. So I thought I'd try one out on you all. Are you ready?

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

Do you know John? Anybody? I'm sure you're all shouting at the screen! Yes, it's from 'Pride and Prejudice' (I think anyone doing GCSE English will know that one!)

There is a point to all this! Because, I was looking at the Gospel reading for today from John and it is from his first chapter. Well, I think most people know how that begins. It's one of the most recognisable verses in the bible and one we often hear read out at Christmas.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.

The most exquisite language used to describe the presence of Christ in the world from the very beginning. No angel messenger or babe born in a manger for John. But the most beautiful story of creation which presents us with the eternal beginning of Christ. Not a fixed time in Bethlehem, but in the beginning in intimate relation with the Father. This is the glory of the eternal word who will come to dwell among ordinary people, among us, bringing together the heights of heaven and the depths of the earth. This first chapter of John is all about showing the way, making the way for Christ in our lives. The Christ who has always been with us.

John the Baptist cries out: "Make straight the way of the Lord". Preparing the way for one greater than himself. John is testifying to the incarnate presence of the Lord as revealed to him by God. John knows who Jesus is.

And it is a very short journey through this first chapter from the description of creation, through the testimony of John the Baptist to the calling of the disciples, which is where our Gospel reading is centred. It feels like a whirlwind journey of excitement. The disciples are awaiting the Messiah and finally it seems he is here. They are ready and waiting and need very little persuasion. It seems that Jesus only needs to walk by and invite them and they are hooked. "Come and See" He says. No command. But that beautiful and intriguing invitation "Come and See". "Follow me" And they do. Andrew was the first follower of Jesus to be identified by name and his reaction is immediate- let me get my brother. His brother whom Jesus was to name Peter. And they tell others. 'We have found Him'. I love the idea that as soon as they met Jesus the disciples dropped everything to join him. Would we do that? Could we?

Names are important, they can say a lot about who we are. When Jesus gives Simon the name Peter, that is because he will become the rock upon whom the church will be built. The name Jesus (or Yeshua in Hebrew) means "God saves" Jesus came down from Heaven to save us from our sins. In the Old Testament reading set for today, Samuel hears the voice of God calling him by name, "Samuel, Samuel" yet he doesn't recognise it. Samuel needs Eli to help him understand. And again in today's Psalm (139) God speaks to us because he knows us. "Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord you know it completely' (...) For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." Few passages in the bible speak of God's closeness to human beings with such subtlety and intimacy. God is not a distant observer but one who looks deeply into individuals and who knows them not partially but rather in the entirety of their existence.

However, in our Gospel reading, when Philip tells Nathanael "We have found him", he is a little scathing in his response. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" I suppose it's a bit like saying 'Can anything good come out of Braintree??!!'

But Jesus' greeting of Nathanael throws him off guard and clearly demonstrates some form of miraculous knowledge of Nathanael's movements. He knows him. In John's Gospel Jesus always recognises us but we do not always recognise him. And Jesus also assures him that there is a far richer basis for his faith than this small miracle.

"Greater things than these you will see" and describes heaven opening and "the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" a wonderful reference to Jacob's ladder in the Old Testament when heaven and earth are brought together. Here, we realise, that where we encounter God now is in the person of his son Jesus and that it is through him that God reveals his truth. Jesus is the meeting point between heaven and earth, he is God's living presence with His people.

As we begin this new year, it's hard to feel excited. So many challenges, so much hardship to bear. Yet God knows us all by name. He calls us by name. He knows our fears. He knows our anxieties. The Old Testament reading from Samuel, Psalm 139 and the Gospel reading from John all show us how we are known and sought out by God. And in being known by God there is a wonderful affirmation for each of us that we matter in our life and we matter in our existence. We are all called by the one who knows us intimately. Who never commands but invites. "Come and see". "Follow me". As we all start this new year. May God help us to hear his voice. Calling each and everyone of us by name. May we be filled with the excitement of the disciples as we hear the good news and open our hearts to make way for Christ in our lives today.

Amen