

“Widening the Circle” – John 1:43-51 – Jan 18/09

Have you noticed how the days are getting just a little bit longer? It's still measured in minutes, but we're far enough from the Winter Solstice (Dec 21) that we can begin to notice the increasing amount of daylight. It's still dark when I get up, but it's no longer dark at 5:00pm. The light is spreading, and that is a very good thing, even if it is bit-by-bit!

I apologize if that is too obvious a lead-in to our look at today's reading from John's gospel, but the connection between the light spreading bit-by-bit in our dark winter and the light spreading bit-by-bit in this particular text was too strong to pass up, especially in this season of Epiphany (named from the Greek word meaning “to shine forth”).

Before we can begin to understand this story we need to acknowledge that there are several curious statements and questions made in this encounter between Jesus and two men whom He called to be disciples. You may recall that just prior to this incident two other men, Andrew and Simon (who would be renamed Peter) who were disciples of John the Baptizer heard that strange prophet comment about Jesus being the “Lamb of God”. Intrigued, they turned to follow Jesus who turned and asked them, “what are you looking for?” We need also to note how powerfully we can read our own prejudices into that – or any – question. With the merest change in inflection the meaning we get from that question changes from a gentle enough enquiry – “yes, can I help you?” through a more confrontational, “what do you want?” and even to the harsh and dangerous street challenge of “you looking at me?”

That sequence is repeated the next day, here in the text we just read, only this time the challenging question is posed by yet another new disciple, Nathaniel, to his buddy Philip. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” is the question, and again we can all too easily force our own interpretation onto the question, depending on our experience or our attitude. Depending on inflection that question can be heard ranging from a gentle, self-effacing sense of wonder, “could it be possible something good can come out of Nazareth?”, signaling a hopefulness, to a snotty and arrogant derision, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, where the implication is “of course nothing can!” Can you see how the answer we understand from the question can be tainted by how we hear the question?

To help in understanding the answers to those questions, a powerful clue comes from Jesus' response, and what that response conveys. Jesus doesn't take the bait and rise to the challenge about Nazareth – instead he turns it around and talks about a positive characteristic of Nathaniel: “behold an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Jesus doesn't argue with Nathaniel about the merits of Nazareth, nor even about the neighbouring town of Cana which appears to be Nathaniel's home town. Jesus doesn't even confront Nathaniel about the nature of his question, but instead affirms Nathaniel and his lack of guile.

Naturally enough, Nathaniel is deflected by Jesus' statement, and a bit off guard asks, “how do you know me?” to which Jesus replies with another most curious statement, “I saw you under the fig tree.” Now I would love to know, and so would people for the last two thousand years, just what Nathaniel was up to ‘under the fig tree’. Scholars and authors and preachers and all kinds of believers have tied themselves up in knots trying to justify why they think Nathaniel was doing something righteous there under that fig tree – I remain unconvinced! But whatever it was, Jesus' knowing about it was enough to convince him that Jesus was truly the Messiah.

Now I have to admit that Nathanael's response is somewhat confusing as well. His confession of faith seems a bit too elaborate, a bit too much to have been prompted solely by Jesus' words to him, especially since he was so reluctant to be accepting when talking with Philip. Nathanael is quoted as gushing forth with a declaration that Jesus is the Son of God, the

King of Israel, and Jesus voices my first thought: “do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” But again, instead of berating Nathanael for that response Jesus promises that he will see even greater things to come.

One perspective on the text that helps us to resolve this dilemma is to see in this incident a parallel with how many came to recognize Jesus for who he was. Named by Jesus as “truly an Israelite”, Nathaniel (who is never mentioned in any other Gospels nor in Acts) could be seen as representative of believing Israel, those within Judaism who accepted Jesus as Messiah. There is some support for that view in the reference to “angels of God ascending and descending”, clearly invoking the image of Jacob at Bethel, where Jacob became Israel. An even stronger basis for seeing the parallel between a simple story of a person meeting Jesus and a universal Christian proclamation is seen much more clearly in the original Greek, where the language shifts from a singular ‘you’ (i.e. Nathanael) to a plural ‘you’ (Israel) is readily apparent in the last verse, “Very truly, I tell (many) you ...” In the conclusion to this episode, Jesus speaks to all, including us.

So we can see then the parallel between one person coming to believe and all Israel coming to believe in Jesus is brought about the same way – through personal invitation, one after the other. The circle of believers is widened as each asks the next, “come and see.” It began with the simple invitation from Jesus to Andrew and Simon (Peter), “come and see.” No histrionics, no laying out of a complicated evangelism program, no harsh command to “go and learn, and when you think you’ve learned enough come back and I’ll test you!” Jesus’ response to the hunger for faith in Andrew and Peter was not a command but an invitation, “come and see.”

Obviously they did, and Philip must have heard them talking (after all, he was from the same city as Andrew and Peter) because he echoes that same invitation to Nathaniel. Jesus found Philip, and invited him, “follow me” and Philip did, inviting Nathaniel to come along. And when Nathaniel asked his confrontational question, Philip in turn invited him to “come and see.” See the progression? Jesus to Andrew and Peter: “come and see.” Philip to Nathaniel, “come and see.” The invitation to learning and growth was absorbed and passed on. The gentle, invitational teaching method of Jesus was picked up by and emulated by his disciples.

Now it is true that a ‘command’ style of instruction can also get passed on ... but it’s useful to note that the command style of instruction is only ‘effective’, if you can call it that, in institutions like jails, the military and para-military organizations, where attendance is enforced with violence.

On the other hand, the invitational style of Jesus helped to build a legion of uncounted voluntary followers, lasting for untold generations. “Come and see” He invited the first two; “follow me” He invited Philip; “come and see” echoed Philip to Nathaniel, and the circle of believers widened.

In fact, that widening of the circle of believers is really what the story of this incident is about, a testimony to the widening circle of witness and faith that in the concluding verse includes you and me. And now it’s our turn to continue widening the circle, to pass on in our turn the invitation to “come and see.”