

“From Cynicism To Faith” – John 1:43-51 – Jan 14/18

I’m starting to notice and really enjoy how the days are getting just a little bit longer. As I come out of the gym after my early-morning workout the sky is now starting to show some light. The other morning the eastern sky was lit up with a broken layer of clouds in all shades of red and orange and it was both beautiful and breathtaking. The change in the length of daylight is still measured in seconds and minutes, but we’re far enough from the Winter Solstice (Dec 21) that we can begin to notice the increasing amount of daylight. The light is spreading, and that is a very good thing, even if it is ever so gradual and 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 opinions and implied responses into that – or any – question. To recognize the effect of that process listen how 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?”

In our reading today we hear that sequence repeated the next day. However, this time the challenging question is posed by yet another new disciple, Nathanael, 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 and into 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 influenced by how we hear the question?

I suspect that most would preach on this text taking the approach that Jesus dialogued with Nathanael in a positive way, hearing his comment to Nathanael about having no guile as being rather a compliment. However, there is a totally different way to hear the conversation here and I think we can grow our own faith a bit by looking at it in that different way.

Let’s start with Nathanael’s question to Philip and hear it in a negative way, a kind of condemnation not only of the region of Nazareth but spilling over into Philip’s choice of a Messiah. Add a bit of nasal sneering to the question, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and you begin to get the sense of just how Nathanael dismissed Philip with a haughty snort.

When we hear it that way, then Jesus’ statement to, or rather about, Nathanael comes across in a totally different light, doesn’t it? With that negative tone ringing in our ears we also can hear Jesus’ comment in a totally different way. Instead of the pleasing patronage of a kind of “here comes an honest fellow” now we might be able to hear Jesus confront Nathanael with a very much in-your-face kind of challenge. Add a bit of a derisive put-down tone to Jesus’

comment and his “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” becomes, “Wow, here is someone whose mouth is three steps ahead of his brain!” A close friend might be able to get away with making such a comment but coming from a complete stranger that would rightfully be taken as a put-down, even a challenge against one’s character.

Naturally enough Nathanael reacts to such a challenge by asking “who are you and how do you think you know me?!” The scene is set for a nasty confrontation, but with his next answer Jesus reveals to Nathanael that he saw him under the fig tree – and note that he includes the detail that it was before Philip called him. I wonder just what it was that Nathanael was doing there under the fig tree before Philip called him. Was he doing something he wouldn’t have wanted anyone else to witness? Was he perhaps engaged in something less tawdry, such as praying? Whatever he was doing it must have been highly personal and caused Nathanael’s cynicism to end and for him to recognize Jesus as 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 here 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 this time instead of berating Nathanael for his response Jesus promises that Nathanael will see even greater things to come.

Really confusing, isn’t it, when seen in a different light? How then can we pull from this incident an insight that helps us grow in our own faith? One way is to see in this incident a parallel with how many people came to recognize Jesus for who he was. A beginning clue comes from Jesus naming Nathanael as “truly an Israelite.” Nathanael (who is never mentioned in any other Gospels nor in Acts) can in this be seen as representative of the faithful in Israel, those within Judaism who accepted Jesus as Messiah. There is some support for this view in the reference to “angels of God ascending and descending”, clearly invoking the image of Jacob at Bethel, where Jacob became Israel. And of course we must remember that this is John’s Gospel, and John constantly points us toward the resurrection of Jesus and we note that a “Nathanael of Cana in Galilee” is included in the list of disciples who encountered the risen Jesus. 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) 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 theology and program of enthusiastic evangelism, no harsh command to “go and purify yourself and when you’re clean enough I’ll accept 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 Nathanael. Jesus found Philip, and invited him, “follow me” and Philip did, inviting Nathanael to come along. And when Nathanael 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 Nathanael, “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 often enforced with punishment, even 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” was Jesus’ invitation to the first two; “follow me” He invited Philip; “come and see” echoed Philip to Nathanael and his cynicism ended and the circle of believers widened.

We live in a world in which the majority of people have a somewhat cynical view of the Christian Church. The reasons for that cynicism are varied and real, and draw upon negative experiences offered by the church: hypocrisy, exclusivism, racism, arrogance, abuse – the list is almost endless. But thankfully not all the Christian faith is like that, and the simplest way to overcome the cynicism that prevents people from experiencing the joy we find is the same as the way in Nathanael’s cynicism was overcome – with a simple invitation, “come and see.” May the Holy Spirit fill us with the grace of God that will help us not only to proffer those invitations but to live our faith in such a way as that cynicism will be converted to faith.