

Our beautiful reading from the Psalms, a prayer by David, reminds us that God has the deepest knowledge of each and every one of us – even when we are not doing anything “you know when I sit and when I rise, you discern my going out and my lying down” ... “you are familiar with all my ways”. It is wonderful to recognise that his omni-sci-ence or comprehensive knowledge of us means that we have the security of knowing that he is always surrounding us and guarding us. God with us.

Each of us has great value in God’s eyes – we are all individuals, known to Him, created by Him and chosen for special or specific purposes – we have a personal relationship with him.

Our Gospel reading from John further illustrates this knowledge that God has of each of us.

At the beginning of this passage Jesus calls Philip – but note the words used “Finding Philip” he said to him “follow me”. In other words he sought Philip out - he knew of him already.

Philip immediately tells his friend Nathaniel about Jesus. But he is a bit more hesitant than Philip, who has to encourage him by inviting him to “come and see” Jesus.

We can learn a lot from Philip – all we have to do is offer an invitation - Jesus does the rest! Philip teaches us to bring others along with us, to offer an invitation. And in reality that’s not too daunting a prospect.

During my research I found that Philip’s friend Nathaniel is called Bartholomew in all the other gospels and in Acts – only John calls him Nathanael. And he is one of the original 12 disciples. Following on from Jon’s talk a couple of week’s ago about names – Bartholomew would have been Nathanael’s Hebrew surname meaning “son of Tolmai” and Nathanael his first name meaning “God has given”.

Our passage illustrates again that we are all known to God – Jesus comments that he had seen Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. I didn’t know till I dug into this that it was customary for Jews to plant a fig tree in front of their house. As the tree matured they would sit under it and study and pray.

And sitting in the shade and safety of your own fig tree was frequently used as an Old Testament metaphor foretelling the coming of the Messianic age – for example in Micah Chapter 4 “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.”

Philip and Nathanael were not scholars – they were probably both fishermen – but they had clearly studied the scriptures in their own time, both recognising that Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament prophesies as the promised Messiah. Something they would have eagerly been waiting or searching for.

Jesus had observed Nathaniel sitting under his fig tree, studying these scriptures and longing for the Messianic age - and Nathanael’s response, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.” recognised Jesus’s divine power.

Prior to this, Nathanael’s initial reaction to Philip’s invitation to meet Jesus was to question if anything of merit ever came out of Nazareth, a small town.

This comment is not a racial or ethnic prejudice as some imply but rather a regional bias – perhaps dare I say, I might refer to Slough in this way (apologies if there is anyone from there here today) or the famous feud between Yorkshire and Lancashire.

On our trip to Israel in 2022 our guide took us to a view point overlooking modern day Nazareth. As well as appreciating a modern city and being shown where the original small area of Nazareth would have been, Our guide Michele told us that the same regional bias is STILL being used today. People STILL say that nothing good comes from Nazareth!!

Despite Nathaniel's typical reaction...Jesus knew Nathanael's heart and didn't chastise him for his comment but greeted him with a compliment - "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Jesus saw and knew his potential.

And Nathanael fully and enthusiastically recognised Jesus as the Messiah.

Both Philip and Nathanael were faithful servants of Jesus but both had questions and concerns, doubts and fears. Despite these they both went on to spread the Gospel after Jesus's resurrection for the rest of their lives being key leaders in the early church. Using their gifts to become all that he saw they could be.

Our own callings may be very modest - We are not all called to be leaders, negotiators or public figures - there are a multitude of ways to serve God but they will always utilize the gifts we have been given. It could be in admin, or caring or cooking.

We might have to step out of our comfort zone and take risks. We might be called to do things that seem daunting or impossible initially but with His help we can accomplish great things. Be open to new opportunities and experiences, trust that God will provide for us every step of the way.

I spoke earlier about Philip inviting Nathaniel to "Come and See". Making that invitation might be a real challenge, but letting someone know they can come and will be welcomed can be the start of a journey to faith.

In December we held the Piano-a-thon and that event invited a huge number of people to come and enjoy being here. It wasn't a worship event, but it was noticeable how many people then came to church over Christmas on the back of enjoying the day here for the Pianoathon. Whether it's us as individuals or us collectively our attitude should always be "come – you are welcome."

Trusting in God's plan for us can be difficult – but by understanding that God has a purpose for everything - we can trust in him. When we submit to his plan for us, we open ourselves up to blessings and opportunities we could never have imagined.

Our calling is not just what we do – it is who we are, permeating every aspect of our lives, from our relationships to our work to our hobbies and interests. By being faithful servants we can let our actions and words reflect His love and grace.

Amen

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