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An Open Mind and an Open Heart

Read John 1:35-51

Do you regard yourself as an open-minded person? Are you willing to revise a cherished notion if new evidence presents itself? I suppose we would all like to think that we are intellectually honest. We want to live in the real world even if it is less comfortable than a fantasy world. Or are you one of those people who say: "I've made up my mind; please don't confuse me with facts"?

This morning the spotlight falls on a man who appears to have had definite views. He sounded sceptical when his friend gave him some information that conflicted with his ideas. His mind was made up but he was prepared to revise his opinion when presented with clear evidence. What seems strange at first is the fact that he changed his opinion so quickly and so completely.

The Sequence of Events

We take up the story on the banks of the Jordan River. John the Baptist is there. Huge crowds are flocking to hear him. Among the crowds are a smaller group whom we may describe as his disciples. His message had struck a chord in their hearts. And some of those followers had come all the way from Galilee. The writer introduces us to Andrew and Simon, Philip and Bartholomew. Although they are not mentioned by name, it is highly likely that John and possibly James were there as well.

It certainly helps us to settle the sequence of events in our minds. John must have been preaching for quite some time, but the writer focuses on events that took place over just a few days. In fact, he focuses on just five days.

On Day 1 a delegation from Jerusalem interrogates John. (At this stage Jesus had already been baptised and had returned from his 40 day temptation in the Wilderness of Judea).

On the next day (Day 2) John identifies him as the "Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world".¹

On the following day (Day 3), John the Baptist draws the attention of two of his disciples to the man whom he described as the Lamb of God. One of these was most certainly Andrew. The other was either Philip or John (probably Philip). They immediately follow him.

Noticing that they are following him, Jesus inquires, "What do you want?" They ask, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Come and you will see." This was most probably 4 in the afternoon.² They spent the rest of the day with him. We have no knowledge of what they discussed, but it is safe to assume that they would have spoken about the meaning of John's baptism in relation to the coming kingdom and possibly of John's identification of him. The two men become convinced that they have met the one whom John has been speaking about in such glowing terms for all these months. What's more, they had come to believe that he was, in fact, the Messiah.

At the first possible moment Andrew brings his brother Simon to Jesus, excitedly telling him, "We have found the Messiah." We must assume that this happened first thing on the next morning. That would make it Day 4. It is a remarkable statement. Remember, at this stage, there had been no miracles. On the other hand, it is not altogether surprising, given John's identification of him and the impression he would have made on the Andrew and his companion as they had spoken. Of course, they did not understand all the implications of such a statement. These were early days. Even later on they battled to understand Jesus' concept of messiahship as distinct from their own expectations. But from the outset they were following a man whom they believed to be the Messiah.³

Jesus looked at him as he approached and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephias (which, when translated, is Peter). *Cephias* is Aramaic and *Petros* is Greek for "Rock". Later, something of the significance of that name would be explained but, before he can do or say anything, Jesus is already predicting the role he is destined to play.⁴

On the following day (Day 5, the day after Simon's introduction to Jesus), Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me!" His instinctive reaction was to find his friend (possibly his best friend) and to tell him about the great discovery they had made. The spotlight now falls on an intriguing conversation between Jesus a man called Nathaniel.

Nathanael and Bartholomew

There are good grounds for believing that he is the Bartholomew in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke).

- In the first place *Bartholomew* is not a first name. The prefix 'bar' means "son of" - so this name probably means "Son of Talmai", much like Simon was Simon *Barjonah* (Son of John).
- Nathanael is a person of some importance. We see him again in chapter 21
- Matthew, Mark and Luke never mention Nathanael; John never mentions Bartholomew.
- Where we read of Nathanael in John's Gospel, he is in the company of the apostles.
- Philip and *Bartholomew* appear together in the lists of the disciples. (Mt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14, but not in Acts 1:12-13) Here we see Philip and *Nathanael* together.

So we have good reason to believe that we are meeting a man who later became one of the twelve disciples

The Intriguing Conversation

Philip announces to him: "We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth - the son of Joseph ..." ⁵

This is an interesting way to describe Jesus. I wonder if Philip and Nathanael had studied together, searching through Moses and the Prophets to discover what was said about the Messiah. It seems, at the very least, that Nathanael was a serious student of the Scriptures.

"Jesus of Nazareth?" Nathanael looks at Philip in utter disbelief. **Nazareth!** Can anything good come from there? There are several possible reasons for Nathaniel's objection. Some have suggested that small town rivalry was involved here. Nathaniel was from Cana and Cana was about 10 kilometres north-east of Nazareth. (21:2) There may have been little respect between the residents of these two towns. Apparently Nazareth did not enjoy a good reputation. It wasn't the most

prestigious location. Realtors avoided it. Maybe, like many others, he did despise the inhabitants of Nazareth. But I think Nathanael was a bit bigger than that. It is most likely that his comment was prompted by his knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. He would have known that Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) and he would have assumed that he would have continued to live in the town.

One way or another: we encounter prejudice in Nathaniel. Our usage of the word tends to associate prejudice with bigotry. But prejudice simply means judging beforehand - coming to a conclusion while the jury is still out. It may or may not be completely irrational. But, in one way or another, we all tend to be 'prejudiced'. Usually we don't know what factors are inclining us to particular views and attitudes. We don't start out devoid of opinions. We have beliefs; we have a worldview, whether or not we take cognisance of it. You have views - views that are based upon your temperamental inclination and are shaped by environmental factors. Your church background plays a part here. Some of the things that constitute your control beliefs were imbibed uncritically. Much of the process of education consists not in acquiring new information but in correcting old notions. It's understandable that we hold certain opinions. In fact, we couldn't live in a conceptual vacuum. *But how important it is that we are prepared to revise our opinions!* How important it is that we are 'open' and not 'closed'!

Philip gave the best possible answer: "Come and see (for yourself)." Even that invitation suggests that he knew Nathanael was open to persuasion. His prejudice was not a dogged refusal to believe. From what he knew of Jesus and from what he knew of Nathanael, he was convinced that if they could meet, Nathanael would believe.

But Nathanael was in for quite a surprise. As he approached Jesus he was greeted by the words: "Truly here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."⁶

Nathaniel was taken aback by that simple statement. "How do you know me?" he asked. (Notice that there is no false modesty here. Nathaniel knows that he is far from perfect, but he knows that he is honest and sincere).

Jesus' answer was all it took: "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree, before Philip called you." Such a simple statement, but Nathaniel

was absolutely amazed by it. His confession seems astonishing to say the least: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

What could have prompted such a dramatic turnaround? Moments ago he was saying, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Now he is declaring that *Jesus of Nazareth* is the Son of God and the king of Israel. Apparently there was something in those few words that Jesus said to Nathaniel that stopped him in his tracks. Those two short statements were enough to convince him that Philip was right. In fact, he went further than Philip had gone.

A few pointers may help us here. The key to this response is to be found not just in the fact that Jesus was aware that Nathaniel had been under the fig tree, but also in what was going on in his mind when he was under the tree.

The Fig Tree

The fig tree was a symbol of blessing and security (1 King 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zech 3:10). During King Solomon's reign, Judah and Israel lived in safety, "each man under his own vine and fig tree." The prophet Micah looks forward to a day when people of many nations will stream to the temple and there will be universal peace. At that time, "every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree." (Micah 4:4) Zechariah predicts a day when one called "the Branch" (a messianic title) reigns and the sin of the land is removed in a single day. "In that day each of you will invite his neighbour to sit under his vine and fig tree,' declares the LORD" (Zech. 3:10).

It is not difficult to understand why the fig tree might become a place of meditation for some who were living in expectation of that great day. Possibly a particular fig tree, away from public view, was Nathanael's regular place of spiritual rendezvous? Whether or not this was so, the Lord was apparently referring to a specific instance, and we have a good idea of what was on Nathanael's mind.

Nathanael, Jacob and Israel

He may well have been reflecting about the Messiah and even about his birthplace. We can't say for sure. But it seems clear that his meditation involved Jacob. The name *Ya-akov* (Jacob) means deceiver or 'supplanter'. And Jacob, as we know, lived up to (or down to) his name.

Some time later Jacob's name was changed to *Yisrael* (Israel). That was at Peniel where he met with God in an extraordinary way. (Gen. 32:27-28) There the groping and manipulating of a lifetime came to an end. The change of name reflected a change of character. Israel means "one who sees God".

As Nathanael approaches Jesus, the Lord says, "Truly, here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."⁷ For all we know, the fig tree may have been Nathaniel's private Peniel. Now link the events of Jacob's life and particularly his name change to Jesus' statement, "Truly here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit," That statement alone is probably not enough to enable us to say for sure that Nathanael had been considering the life of Jacob. But there is more.

"Jacob's Ladder"

We have a seemingly strange statement in verses 50 and 51: "Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you (singular) I saw you under the fig tree? You (singular) shall see greater things than that.' He then added, 'I tell you (plural) the truth, you (plural) shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"

Jesus comments on Nathanael's faith and assures him that he will see still greater things. He then includes others in the promise (hence the change to a plural pronoun and verb), assuring him that he and his fellow disciples have embarked on an exciting journey - one that will involve far greater things than the revelation he has just experienced. As we shall see, the reference here is very definitely to Jacob. In fact, that's what makes me certain that the allusion in verse 47 is to him.

Let me explain. Esau is furious and wants to murder his brother and so their mother, Rebekah, arranges for Jacob to leave home. Leaving his family and his homeland is the most difficult thing he has ever done. He sets out on his long journey. As night falls after the first day's journey he stops at a certain place, puts a stone under his head and falls asleep.

In a dream he sees a stairway resting on the earth and reaching to heaven. The angels of God are ascending and descending upon it. There above it stood the LORD. God repeats the promise to him and assures him that he will watch over him and bring him back to the land. When Jacob awakes he thinks to himself, "Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than *Beyt Elohim* (the house of God); this is the gate of heaven." (Gen 28:16-17). He calls the place *Beyt-el* (Bethel) - the house of God.

The dream was an indication not only of God's concern and his faithfulness, but also of the link between heaven and earth. It was an assurance to Jacob that the decrees of heaven will be carried out on earth.

Now, think of the significance of Jesus' statement to Nathanael: "You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending *on the Son of Man*." "Son of Man" is title Jesus uses time and again to describe who he is. To understand its significance one has to read Daniel 7:13-14.

That was all it took. John the Baptist had said he was about to appear. He had pointed him out. His close friend, Philip, had become convinced. *Nazareth?* that still didn't add up. But there was something in this man's bearing and he knew what no man could know by natural means. He knew exactly what was going on in the deepest recesses of Nathaniel's heart.

Relevance for Today

Of course Nathanael's situation was unique and special. By the way, this was not a case of Jesus exercising the powers of omniscience. As the Spirit-anointed Servant of the Lord, he was given insight by the Spirit, as it was needed.

In the first place, there is a sense in which Nathanael's experience applies to all of us. As the ascended Lord, *he sees and knows us - every one of us*. He sees you under your own fig tree; in times of tranquillity and of turmoil; when you're being good and when you are being bad; when you are seeking God and when you are fleeing from him. There is both a challenge and an assurance here for each one of us.

Secondly, it's important to realise that *the problem of unbelief is not on account of a lack of evidence*. We've all heard people protest, sometimes proudly: "I'm too much of a questioner; I don't just accept things. You can't expect me to be gullible. I'm a scientific person. I need proof." Of course there are people who are genuinely unconvinced, and we should respect them and their right to assemble and evaluate the evidence. I would just hope that they are applying the same criteria to all that they accept. Nowadays we understand that certainty, in the sense of absolute proof, is not even possible in the so-called exact sciences. The insistence on absolute proof is more the product of Enlightenment naïveté than of a scientific mindset.

Sometimes the call for absolute proof is little more than a smoke screen and can be an evidence of the very deceit from which Nathaniel was free. Just how much evidence is enough? It all depends on whether you *want* to be a willing and honest believer.

Jesus told Nathaniel that he would see greater things. Whenever one embarks on a journey of faith, that promise holds good. Not all Nathaniel's questions were instantaneously answered. Some had not yet arisen in his mind. But he had embarked upon an exciting journey of faith. The question he was asking under the fig tree would be answered in ways that would boggle his mind and expand his horizons. He would see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on a Supernatural Stairway that far surpasses Jacob's ladder. The shift from the singular to the plural in verses 50 and 51 is not accidental. Jesus was speaking to Nathanael and he said, in effect: "Nathanael you have believed because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. Nathanael you shall see greater things than that. In fact, Nathanael, both you and your fellow believers (that includes us) will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

What a Chapter!

Can you see what the Apostle John has done in one great chapter? He has introduced us to the Eternal Word who became man and pitched his tent among us. (1:1, 14) He has told us through John the Baptist that he is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. (1:29, 36) He has identified him as the Messiah. (1:41) He is the King of Israel of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote. (1:45, 49) He is none other than the Son of God (1:49). As the Son of Man, to whom all dominion belongs, he is the great mediator between God and man, the bridge between heaven and

earth (1:51-52). "No one has ever seen God, but God, the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." (1:18) What a chapter!

Conclusion

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? You had better believe it!

Notes

1. In verse 34 he uses the perfect tense: which adds force to the statement. It refers to an action that took place in the past the results of which continue in the present: "I *have seen* and testify that this is the Son of God."
2. It could have been 10 a.m. or 4 p.m., depending on how John was computing time.
3. Difficulties arose as they got to know Jesus better. On the one hand, they witnessed the most amazing miracles. On the other, he was very different from the messiah of popular expectation. These initial enthusiastic responses are understandable in view of John's testimony and the impression Jesus made on them. Later, more considered, statements were made in spite of the fact that they were puzzled by the nature of Jesus teaching and demeanour. (Matthew 16:16-18)
4. There need be no conflict between this account and Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16:16-18. Here the future, passive is used: "You *shall be called* Cephas (Peter)." In Matthew present active is used: "You *are* Peter." After the first meeting, the name Simon would continue to have been used. Even after the statement in Matthew 16, Peter would often have been referred to as Simon. (Mt. 10:2; 17:1; John 18:10-11; 21:11, 15)
5. This was the normal way to introduce a person. You mentioned their father's name and their place of origin. Quite possibly this is an instance of John's use of irony. He knows that Joseph was not Jesus' natural father, but he identifies him as the son of Joseph and his town of origin as Nazareth. In chapter 7 John refers to a discussion between several of the worshippers at the Feast of Tabernacles. Some said, "He is the Christ," but others asked, "How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem?" This is possibly part of the deliberate play on the paradoxical themes of revelation and hiddenness. The light shines but is not recognised; the divine becomes human; his glory is seen but

concealed; the glorious one is humiliated; indeed his glory includes his degradation and his shameful death.

6. This is a better rendering of the original text than "a true Israelite".
7. The more one examines the account, the more convinced one becomes that Jesus is referring to Nathanael in terms of Jacob, and especially Jacob's name change to Israel. (Gen 32:27-28) We know that Jacob deceived his father into pronouncing Esau's blessing upon him. (Genesis 27) Genesis 27:35 and 36 are particularly relevant. Esau complains: "Isn't he rightly called Jacob? (The name *Ya-akov* means deceiver or supplanter). He has deceived me these two times..." (Gen. 27:36). The word translated 'deceived me' is *Ya-ak'vayni*. Isaac said to a devastated Esau, "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing. (Gen 27:35) In the LXX (the Septuagint - the Greek translation of the Old Testament) the verse reads: "Your brother came *with deceit (meta dolou)* and took your blessing." As Nathaniel approaches Jesus, the Lord says, "Truly, here is an Israelite in whom there is no *dolos* (deceit: the same word - *dolou* is Genitive case and *dolos* the Nominative case)."