

Nazareth

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

January 13, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Psalm 139

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A priest - a friend of mine - returned from a visit to the Holy Land and I went to see him. "What was it like?" I asked him. He sat me down and shared with me some pictures he had taken. Eventually we came to a picture of Nazareth. It looked singularly unimpressive. "Is that Nazareth?" I asked, expecting something a little more, well, holy. I looked at an unremarkable picture of houses on a hill which could have been anywhere. My friend replied that, as a town, Nazareth wasn't very interesting, unlike Jerusalem, or Jericho, or Lake Tiberius, or indeed most of the places he had visited.

A few years later I had an opportunity to see for myself. It is almost six years ago to the day, since I was in Nazareth, as part of a clergy study tour. I kept a diary of each day's excursion, and recently I re-read my entry for that day. Here's what I wrote:

Tuesday, January 20, 2015

*After a lunch of falafels, pitta bread and salad at a nearby restaurant we continue on to Nazareth and visit the Basilica of the Annunciation. We join a queue of traffic in the heart of the town, and watch as cars cut in and out from all directions. Eventually we find somewhere to park. As we walk toward the entrance of the Basilica, Ami [our tour guide] points out a large sign calling upon Christians to renounce belief in the Holy Trinity and "say nothing but the truth about Allah." From being once a small village with a majority Christian population it has, in the last century, grown into a large town with a population divided equally between Muslims and Christians.*

I go on to record our visit to the church, and then describe what happened afterwards:

*On our way back to the car we encounter a street demonstration by Israeli Arabs, who hold up banners and carry out a long call and response protest. They take their position on a roundabout and mothers and children mill around behind the men. One boy waves a Palestinian flag. The protest is over two bedouins killed by Israeli police two days ago. The protestors are calling it an attack on Islam. It is an example of how quickly events can become politicized here.*

Reflecting on that encounter, it feels as though two things were happening. First, we had come as pilgrims to the place where Jesus spent most of his life. The second thing that happened is that we entered into *current* history - the hostility of Islam to Christianity, and the grievances of a people under Israeli rule. As we stood across the road watching the protestors, did we feel unsafe? The answer was no - but I felt for the protestors, who were taking a risk to protest. The protest continued without being stopped by the police, but for how long, I don't know. Soon after we left Nazareth and made our way to Tiberius.

Nazareth is mentioned this morning in our gospel reading from John. Jesus goes to Galilee, and finds Philip there. Philip then finds his friend Nathanael and shares with him the news:

“We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

There is a lot of “finding” going on in this passage. Jesus “finds” Philip, who then “finds” Nathanael. Philip then tells Nathanael, “we have found [the one we were looking for.]” The order of events is important here. Jesus first finds Philip, who then finds Nathanael. Jesus is searching for and finding his disciples. Jesus reaches out to Nathanael through Philip. Then Philip takes Nathanael and the two of them go together to find Jesus. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming towards him, he says, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” To which Nathanael asks the question, “Where did you get to know me?”

In these few short sentences, Jesus is finding the people he wants to share his mission with, and already we can see the galvanizing effect it is having on them. News of Jesus spreads by word of mouth: one friend tells another, and the two of them set out together. In a subtle way, the pattern for ministry is being formed at the outset: the disciples traveling in pairs, which is how Jesus instructs them later on when he sends them into the villages and towns to spread the message of the gospel.

When Nathanael finds Jesus, we learn that Jesus already knows him. In his first encounter with Jesus, Nathanael receives a kind of blessing, when Jesus praises his lack of deceit or guile. It’s a clue to us of the type of people Jesus wants for his mission - not so much people with a track record of having done something already, but people of integrity, whose *personal* qualities make them suitable: in Nathanael’s case, Jesus praises his honesty. That honesty may include a lack of tact, because earlier he had remarked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” He finds the answer soon enough.

One of the things we learn in this encounter, is that Jesus knows us before we know him. That’s why the initiative to follow him always comes first from Jesus. Of course, it is unlikely that Jesus will appear to you in a vision and call you to follow him. He is more likely to use someone like Philip to bring you to him. I am assuming Nathanael and Philip were friends, and so Nathanael trusts Philip and goes along with him. And Nathanael asks Jesus this direct question, which is one we can ask, “Where did you get to know me?”

The answer is in our psalm this morning, which begins “Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.” Psalm 139 is one of the best loved psalms, along with Psalm 23. In another verse there are these lines, “For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” We are made in God’s image, and each of us is known by God. Each of us is loved by God, and to each of us, God reaches out and calls us to follow his son Jesus Christ. Although none of us is perfect, the fact that Jesus calls us to follow him should give us confidence. We know this is a good call - maybe one we have been searching for - because within all of us is that spark of love and the knowledge of God, which provides us with the glimmer of recognition we need, in order to respond.

When Nathanael asked the question of Jesus, “where did you get to know me,” Jesus could have read him psalm 139. Instead, he playfully answers the question in a literal way by saying, “under the fig tree”. Jesus’ sense of humor runs throughout the gospel, but you have to look closely to find it.

Our calling as Christians is to be found in God. That means to recognize Jesus when he comes searching for you. It means acknowledging that spark inside of you which is searching for meaning, searching for the path to life and joy. As people we are already known to Jesus, and his desire is for us to know him. So make that your aim - to know Jesus. Nathanael, the truth teller, identified him straightaway: The Son of God! The King of Israel!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Father David Beresford