

The Lives of The Twelve Apostles

Sermon # 8

“Nathanael – A Man Without Guile”

John 1:43-51

We were introduced to Nathanael as we looked at the life of Philip last week. The story of Nathanael is the last in a sequence of stories of disciples who came to faith in Jesus. If Philip was frequently a “Man of Out of His Element” then in contrast Nathanael appears to be a man of great spiritual depth.

Nathanael a Jew from Cana in Galilee (Jn 21:2) is listed as Bartholomew in all four lists of the Twelve Apostles (Mt 10:3, Mk 3:18, Lk 6:14, Acts 1:13). Bartholomew is a Hebrew name which means “*son of Tolmoi.*” Nathanael means “*a gift of God*” the Greek equivalent is Theodore.

One of my favorite stories concerning names comes out of the hippy days of the 1960’s. “When the 1960s ended, San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district reverted to high rent, and many hippies moved down the coast to Santa Cruz. They had children and got married, too, though in no particular sequence. But they didn’t name their children Melissa or Brett. People in the mountains around Santa Cruz grew accustomed to their children playing Frisbee with little Time Warp or Spring Fever. And eventually Moonbeam, Earth, Love and Precious Promise all ended up in public school.

That’s when the kindergarten teachers first met Fruit Stand. Every fall, according to tradition, parents bravely apply name tags to their children, kiss them good-bye and send them off to school on the bus. So it was for Fruit Stand. The teachers thought the boy’s name was odd, but they tried to make the best of it.

“Would you like to play with the blocks, Fruit Stand?” they offered. And later, “Fruit Stand, how about a snack?” He accepted hesitantly. By the end of the day, his name didn’t seem much odder than Heather’s or Sun Ray’s. At dismissal time, the teachers led the children out to the buses. “Fruit Stand, do you know which one is your bus?” He didn’t answer. That wasn’t strange. He hadn’t answered them all day. Lots of children are shy on the first day of school. It didn’t matter. The teachers had instructed the parents to write the names of their children’s bus stops on the reverse side of their name tags. The teacher simply turned over the tag. There, neatly printed, was the word “Anthony.” [Luanne Oleas in Salinas, Calif., Reader’s Digest - www.bible.org/illus/n/names]

Besides his name all that we really know about Nathanael is what happened when he first met Jesus.

Philip Tells Nathanael About Jesus (vv. 42-45)

"The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, "Follow Me." (44) Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. (45) Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (46) And Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

You remember from our last study that as soon as Philip had met Jesus that he immediately went and found his friend Nathanael and told him about Jesus.

Nathanael is apparently a fairly knowledge-able student of the Old Testament for it is to his knowledge of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah that Philip appeals in his introduction. His ability to recognize Jesus clearly and instantly as the Messiah is based in part on the fact that he had a clear understanding of what the Old Testament scripture said about Him.

But initially, Nathanael is less than impressed to learn that Jesus is from Nazareth and says "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (v. 46). Nathanael's prejudice may be nothing more than the fact that it was a little village not far from his own home town of Cana. The Judean looked down on the Galileans but even the Galileans looked down on those from Nazareth. Herbert Lockyer in his book on the Apostles maintains that Nathanael's prejudice is not caused by pride but by humility. His inward thoughts being "Surely the Messiah can never come from among a poor despised people such as we are – from Nazareth or any other Galilean town or village?" [Herbert Lockyer. All the Apostles of the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) p. 60]

So what could Philip do? Philip could have tried to argue him out of his skepticism.

But as William Barclay wrote, "Not many people have ever been argued into Christianity. Often our arguments do more harm than good. The only way to convince a man of the supremacy of Christ is to confront him with Christ!" Prejudice is rarely over-come by argument. They can only be removed by fact. So Philip, instead of arguing with Nathanael, simply invited him to "Come and See."

"William Barclay tells a story about how, at the turn of the century, Thomas Huxley, the great agnostic, was attending a party at a country mansion. Rich people do parties different than us - the guests stayed for several days. Sunday came around, and most of the guests prepared to go to church.

Very naturally, Huxley did not get ready. Instead, he approached a man known to have a simple and radiant Christian faith.

Huxley said to him, "Suppose you don't go to church today. "Suppose you stay at home and you tell me quite simply what your Christian faith means to you and why you are a Christian."

"But," said the man, "you could demolish my arguments in an instant. "I'm not clever enough to argue with you." Huxley said gently: "I don't want to argue with you. I just want you to tell me simply what this Christ means to you."

The man stayed at home and simply told Huxley of his faith. When he had finished there were tears in the great agnostic's eyes. "I would give my right hand if only I could believe that." It was not clever argument that touched Huxley's heart, but the simple story of a man's faith."

The best argument is to say to people, "Come and see!"

Jesus Makes A Pronouncement About His Character (v. 47)

"Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!"

Jesus greets Nathanael as "an Israelite in whom is no deceit." This is not empty flattery but a statement of fact. It describes Nathanael as a man of integrity. There is no pretense about Nathanael, what you see is what you get. But notice that Jesus does not say, "*Behold an Israelite in whom there is no sin!*" There seem to be some irony between the character of Nathanael and the deceitfulness that too often was found in the Israelites.

Ray Stedman writes rather humorously, "I submit to you that that is indeed a miracle!

"An Israelite in whom there is no guile!" Any of you who have had anything to do with a Jewish businessman knows what a wonder this is! I do not think I will be accused of anti-Semitism in saying that; I have many Jewish friends and I find they laugh at themselves about this. They have a peculiar propensity for being sharp in a business deal, of being able to lull somebody's suspicions and bring him along. Many a Gentile has had to say, "I was a stranger, and you took me in!" [Ray Stedman. *The Man Who Knew Men*. John 1:35-51. www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/john/3835.html]

The Psalmist says in (32:2) "Blessed is the man to whom The LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit *there is no deceit.*"

In this verse we have the first mention by Jesus of Jacob. What Jesus literally says here is, "*Nathanael you are Israelite in whom is found no Jacob.*" Why Jesus referring to Jacob will become clear to us as we proceed.

I Saw You In Your Secret Place. (v. 48)

Nathanael is astonished by what Jesus knows about him and responds in verse forty-eight, by asking him "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

I think that there is more to Jesus alluding to Philip being under a fig tree than we might at first assume. What Jesus said clearly meant a lot to Nathanael, but it is not at all obvious to us.

Palestine in the time of Jesus, as today, had a hot arid climate. It could get very hot in the summer and there were no amenities such as air conditioning. So people went outdoors and they specifically used the shade of a tree as a good place to escape the heat. It was to such a place that one would retire to do their bible study, to mediate on God's word and to pray. To be under your fig tree, literally or figuratively, came to mean to be in a time of prayer, mediation and Bible study.

It seems fair to say that Nathanael had not only been under the fig tree in Bible study and prayer but he has some kind of an outstanding experience on this particular day.

The Psalmist tells us in (139:1-4) "O LORD, You have searched me and known me. (2) You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. (3) You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. (4) For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether."

The prophet Jeremiah said (23:24),
"Can anyone hide himself in secret places,
So I shall not see him?" says the LORD; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD."

Nathanael Recognizes Jesus As the Son of God (vv. 49-51) "Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

I am inclined to believe that in response to Nathanael's shock that Jesus knew that he had been under the fig tree that Jesus told him what he had been reading and mediating about. In my imagination I see Nathanael reading the story of Jacob and wrestling with God. Perhaps part of Nathanael's prayer that morning was, "*God help me to not be a deceiver like Jacob was in the beginning but help me to like he became, Israel Prince of God.*" (Genesis 32:28)

All it took for Nathanael to believe was for Jesus to look in his heart, assess his character and tell him where he knew he had not been seen and to reveal the very subject that was upon his heart at the time.

You Are the Son of God. He affirms that Jesus is the Son of God. He is the emphatic pronoun "you." It singles Jesus out from all others. Nathanael recognizes Jesus is not just "a" son of God but that he is "the" SON OF GOD!!!!

You Are the King of Israel. Nathanael goes on to speak of Jesus as "The King of Israel." This expression is found only three other times in all of the New Testament (Mt 27:42, Mk 15:32, John 12:13).

Jesus commends him for that simple, immediate faith in verse fifty: - "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." That's wonderful, Nathanael. But faith like that is going to be shown greater things yet." Then Jesus said to him in verse fifty-one, "Most assuredly, [literally it is "truly, truly or verily, verily - this is the first time Jesus uses that expression, which always headlines what he is saying, to indicate that it is very important] I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Once again there a reference to Jacob, this time it is a reference to the dream that Jacob had centuries earlier (Genesis 28:12). Jacob left his home, fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau. He headed for his uncle's home in far-off Haran. At the site of the little city of Bethel (now in Israel), he had a dream. Lonely and frightened, Jacob put his head on a stone for a pillow, fell asleep, and dreamed that he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven, and on it saw the angels of God ascending and descending. Jesus said to Nathanael, *"You are going to understand that dream when you learn of me. You will learn that I am the way to God for man, and the way for God to reach man. I am the link, the mediator, who spans the gulf between God and man."* The angels in our text do not ascend and descend on a ladder as in Jacob's dream, but upon the Son of God. Jesus is the only mediator, between heaven and earth (1 Tim 2:5). When you come to know Jesus you have found God.

I want us to look again at verse fifty-one in the King James Version, "And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." The verse begins with "and he (that is Jesus) said to him (that is Nathanael)" but notice the change in pronouns for it says, "hereafter you (plural) shall see." This is a promise that is intended for all those who follow Christ.