

John 1: 43 – 51 Sermon –Year B
Second Sunday after Epiphany

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, “Where did you get to know me?”, “Come and see”, “Follow me”.

Two questions, two invitations. And these are the questions that arose for me: Who do people think Jesus is today? What does following him look like? What do we come up against as we try to follow him? How can we live as faithful followers?

Firstly, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth”? What we see here is Nathanael’s skepticism of a seemingly insignificant town. Nazareth at the time of Jesus was a small village of about 120 – 150 people. And while close to main trade-routes and the major cosmopolitan city of Sepphoris, Nazareth appeared to have a small town stigma. The stigma of being populated by people regarded as uneducated and uncouth. And we constantly see this skepticism about Jesus in the gospels, people questioning his credentials, his authority.

We see this skepticism about Jesus in today’s society. And there has been a progression in that skepticism. Whereas the skepticism used to be concerning the divinity of Jesus, “he was a good man, but only a man”, now the skepticism is not just about his divinity but his very existence as a person in 1st century Palestine. Most serious scholars, religious and atheist, take Jesus’ existence as a given fact. It’s those internet keyboard warriors who say Jesus never existed. In fact, a 2015 survey of 3,000 adults in the UK found that 39% thought Jesus was a mythical figure. I imagine the number here would be roughly the same, perhaps even higher. And those that try and show evidence to the contrary to these keyboard warriors are soon howled down with ignorant, unreflective, strident opposition. Truth and fact is often the first casualty in these keyboard wars. How then do we speak of a Jesus that many nowadays don’t even believe existed?

Which leads me to the second question – “Where did you get to know me?”

Nathanael asks this of Jesus and concludes from Jesus’ answer “Rabbi, you are the

Son of God!” And as the Son of God, indeed as God himself, Jesus can rightly say to us, “I formed your inward parts; I knit you together in your mother’s womb”. There has never been a time that Jesus has not known us intimately and very often in spite of that knowing, continued to love us faithfully and unconditionally.

But what if that question is turned around and Jesus directs it towards us, “Where did you get to know me?” Note the question isn’t, “where did you get to know about me?” It’s asking about that ongoing finding out about someone, it’s about relationship. Further questions that arise for me from this, individually and collectively are, “Where and how do we get to know Jesus on an ongoing, building relationship basis?” What can we do to get to know Jesus better? What could we offer to people who may know of Jesus but not know him? What can we offer to those 39 percenters who don’t even believe Jesus existed, let alone is alive today?

Which leads me into the offer, “Come and see”. Note that Philip doesn’t keep his encounter with Jesus to himself. He finds Nathanael and says, “Come and see”. This is not about individualism, so pervasive and distancing in our society. This is about sharing the experience. Philip is saying, “Nathanael, I’m inviting you with your questions and your skepticism, bring them to Jesus, engage with him. Don’t just stand back wondering and scoffing”.

Could there be something in this speaking to us as we think about our own friendships and social networks? We probably all know people who don’t believe in the relevance of Jesus or even in Jesus. They don’t know him, but they know us. They may not take the time to listen to the scholars, but they just may take the time to listen to us. What if we said to those we know, bring your questions, bring your skepticism and what I offer in return is my story: remember that terrible time I went through, I felt that Jesus was....and tell them about that time we felt loved and supported and hopeful when everything around us screamed out “it’s hopeless, nobody cares”.

People sneer at “experts”, opinions, facts and truth. But they can’t deny our personal experience, our stories. They might not come to the same conclusions, but if they

are friends, they will respect our experience and it might just get them thinking. Who knows where that come and see might lead them in the slow, still work of God?

“Follow me” Jesus says to Philip and Philip follows. Jesus invites us all to follow him into a life of discipleship. And discipleship in the Johannine gospel is first and foremost about loving relationship manifesting itself in a life connected to others. Discipleship is expressed and lived out in a myriad of ways: in prayer, in reading, in quiet, in community, and Father John will be exploring a way that has stood the test of time and tide, and benefited countless followers when he speaks about The Rule of Benedict at this year’s Summer School. I invite you to come along and explore this pathway in the discipleship journey.

Jesus calls us to follow him. To be nurtured and strengthened in that following and then go out and invite others to explore the possibility of this following life. To invite those with “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” skepticism. Those who may exclaim to Jesus with both wonder and fear, “Where did you get to know me?” as they become aware of his existence and his desire for them to know of his. To be courageous enough to say, “Come and see” as we daily live out the invitation we accepted to “Follow me”.

In closing I return to my opening questions, slightly tweaked, “Who do you think Jesus is?”, “What does following him look like for you?”, “What do you come up against as you follow him?” and finally, “What are you doing to care for yourself and other believers to live as faithful followers?”