**SERMON 17th January 2021**

*1 Samuel 3: 1 – 20; John 1: 43 - 51*

Found, follow, found, found, come, see, come, know, saw, believe, saw, see, tell, see, ascending, descending.

Apart from the verbs ‘to be’ and ‘to say’, these are all the verbs used in the one hundred- and eighty-seven-word story that we read from the Gospel of John this morning about Jesus, Philip and Nathaniel: found, follow, found, found, come, see, come, know, saw, believe, saw, see, tell, see, ascending, descending.

The last time we read a story from the Gospel of John was a couple of weeks before Christmas, it was the story of John the Baptist. At the time, I suggested that if we wanted to understand the story better, we might read it as if the genre of the story was comedy.

This story this morning is from the same chapter, but the action has moved on. I think to understand it better we could do the same, and look at it through the eyes of comedy. While this I think would be possible, instead, this time, I would like to take a different approach and look at the words the author has used and the construction of the dramatic narrative.

Looking at biblical stories in this way has a long history. Back in the nineteenth century biblical scholars were already asking such questions as, what is the genre of the text, what words are being used in the text, and what can we imagine about its setting in the ancient near-east of the first century, in order to appreciate better the richness of the biblical stories, and to understand them better?

The story we read is a very short story, 187 words, which takes less than two minutes to tell. Of these 187 words, verbs are used 15 times, apart from the verbs to be and to say. Here they are again in order – listen to them, what do you hear? Found, follow, found, found, come, see, come, know, saw, believe, saw, see, tell, see, ascending, descending.

The word found appears three times; follow, once; come, twice; see, five times; know, once; believe, once; and then the words ascending, and descending appear in Jesus’ short speech at the end. Based on the verbs that the story uses, we could say that this story is about seeing, and it is about coming and finding.

Of course, a story isn’t just understood by which words are used in it, but also by the way those words are used; the story’s drama that is shaped by them.

Jesus finds Philip, who on being found, follows. Philip finds Nathanael who on being found, doesn’t follow because he trusts his own judgement over that of his friend’s, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’

But, Nathaniel’s own judgement is biggoted. He judges people, not on the basis of his experience of them, but on his general view of where they come from. You are a bigot if you think all Glaswegians are drunkards; all Edinburgers snobs; all Africans lazy; all Americans stupid, or if you think nothing good comes out of Nazareth. Nathanael, who is found by Philip, doesn’t follow Jesus because he is more attached to his small-minded prejudices than he is to his friend’s lived experience.

‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote…’. You can’t have done, replies Nathanael, Jesus is from Nazareth, and nothing good comes out of Nazareth. But, there is obviously some strength to these men’s friendship because despite Nathanael’s obstinacy he is at least willing to go and have a look. But, it is not what he sees that changes his mind, it is what sees him; Jesus sees him.

When he sees him, Jesus doesn’t rise to Nathanael’s rudeness. Instead, he pays him a complement, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ It sounds like a compliment, unless Jesus is being deeply sarcastic, and using sarcasm to poke fun at Nathanael’s bigotry. ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ says Nathanael. ‘Oh, here’s someone who is a respectable and honest Israelite!’ replies Jesus.

We, reading this text, might read Jesus’ words as sarcasm, but Nathanael, hearing what Jesus said, is so full of himself that he hears Jesus’ words as complimentary and respectful. ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,’ says Jesus. Oh, says Nathanael, how kind, you already know me, I am indeed an Israelite in whom there is no deceit – and he is impressed. We know better of course, we know Nathanael is a bigot, and so does Jesus.

Jesus goes further, I could tell just by looking at you that you are an Israelite in whom there is no deceit, he says. At this Nathanael becomes so puffed up that he is willing to say anything, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ The only person who could possibly know me, Nathanael, so well, an Israelite in whom there is no deceit, could only possibly be the Son of God himself.

Then Jesus closes the conversation with a bit of a put down, if you believe that, just because I saw you under a fig tree, then just wait there is much, much more to come.

In this short story, there is not only drama, a dramatic encounter between Jesus and Nathanael, there is also character development. Nathanael is transformed. At the start of the story, he is a rude, credulous bigot, by the end he is a humble follower of Jesus.

Furthermore, there isn’t just drama, and development, but there is a twist at the end. The twist at the end uses irony. At the beginning of the story Nathanael is disbelieving because he doesn’t think anything good can come out of Nazareth, consequently he is unwilling to believe Philip when Philip claims that Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth is, ‘him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.’

But, at the end of the story, Nathanael declares that Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth is the Son of God, the King of Israel. And there is the irony. Nathanael wasn’t going to follow Jesus because he thought nothing good could come out of Nazareth, but Jesus doesn’t come out of Nazareth, he comes out of heaven, ‘Very truly, I tell you,’ he says to Nathanael, ‘you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

Nathanael’s bigotry at the beginning of the story blinded him to what might be possible, but Jesus used the person Nathanael was – that very bigotry - to transform him, to find him, and to help him to see what he couldn’t see before.

There are other stories in the Gospels about Jesus calling people to follow him, this story isn’t even the only one in the Gospel of John, but this story has important lessons for us as individuals and as a church.

It asks us to examine our own prejudices. Even the disciples came to Jesus as people whose characters left much to be desired. Whoever Nathanael was in real life, his character flaw held him back, until Jesus saw that flaw and used it to transform him. What prejudices do we have? We shouldn’t worry about examining them, or of being ashamed of them, because Jesus can use them to transform us.

This is a story about being seen for who we really are, being found by Jesus despite who we are, and then, when we follow the one who finds us, we are transformed and are able to see and understand God, the world us, ourselves and other people more clearly than ever before. God doesn’t accept us as we are, he meets us as we are, but wants to find us, and see us, and know us, and call us so that we can become the best of ourselves, see clearly, and follow faithfully.

But, this story doesn’t just have lessons for us as individuals, it also has lessons for us as Christians held together by the Holy Spirit, the church.

This story should give us confidence by reminding us of the nature of other people’s prejudices. There are plenty of people who have a lot to say about the church, but who haven’t darkened the door of the place in years, or ever, and who make their minds up based on the worst stories they hear in the media. We are not what others say that we are.

But, that should make us ask, what would people find if they came to see the church? Would they follow on the basis of what they found when they saw? What does the church look like to an outsider? Would what they find confound their expectations?

Those are questions for us as a congregation, but they also apply to each of us as Christians, indeed to each of us in any walk of life; what do people see when they encounter you? If a modern-day Philip invited a modern-day sceptic like Nathanael to come and meet you, what would that person find? A Christian who confounded their expectations, an ‘Israelite’ – so to speak – in whom there in no deceit?

The world around us, our society, our church, our very personhood can be transformed, argues John, the writer of this Gospel, but for that transformation to happen we have to ‘come’, we have to search and find, and we have to see clearly. And, the catalyst, the agent of transformation, for all that change is Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth, the Son of God, the King of Israel, the Son of Man upon whom the angels of God ascend and descend.