

**Second Sunday of Epiphany,
Sunday, 17th January 2021**



Dear Friends,

‘I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.’

(John 1: 48)

On Wednesday, I joined 250 or so colleagues from around the Diocese for a Zoom study day on the Church of England’s new teaching and learning resources on identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage called *Living in Love and Faith* or LLF as we will come to know it. Perhaps you were part of the day? Because we all came together via Zoom, I wasn’t able to see any of the other participants, just the course leaders. But I did meet some lovely people throughout the day in a ‘break-out’ study group of seven participants. Thrown together randomly, we will be continuing together over the next weeks and months, and who knows, maybe even years, from many different perspectives, growing in acceptance of difference and learning to discern God’s will for us in this complex area surrounding our being each made uniquely by God in His likeness.



The material of the course, covering Bible, Doctrine and Ethics, History, and Science, was interspersed with some excellent video clips; conversations, if you will, which offered the viewer a warm and honest insight into the lives of individuals, couples, and families as told in their own words, from very different backgrounds and experiences than our own. Andrew Goddard, Senior Research Fellow of the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics based in Cambridge and contributor to the development of the LLF resource material, explains:

Across a range of ages, ethnicities, and churchmanship we meet couples, single people, those who have experienced divorce or bereavement, those who identify as gay, lesbian, trans, intersex, same-sex attracted. Here, in the words of the website, “we encounter people seeking to follow Christ, allowing them to take root in our hearts and prayers.

While not necessarily reflecting the teaching of the Church of England, they enrich our learning and invite us to acknowledge the diversity found in the Church today”. For many of us, watching these films has been one of the most powerful parts of LLF. We hear of people’s joys and pains and their experiences of God and the church as they seek to follow Jesus and live in love and faith. We are moved to think further, drawing on the other resources, about their different and often seemingly incompatible accounts of their respective journeys and understandings of God’s will.

We are brought face to face with the reality that these many voices are all part of Christ’s one church which helps explain why our disagreements are so painful and seemingly intractable. We are challenged to consider how we would respond to these people in our own congregations, how their stories might cause us to reflect further on our attitudes (the evils of prejudice, fear, ignorance, hypocrisy etc.), our pastoral practice, our local church life, our way of teaching, and our understanding of God’s will.

I make no apologies for giving you quite an in-depth exposure to the content of the course here, as I believe the Church of England, and indeed all Christian faith groups and denominations, are woefully ignorant of the reality of others’ lives, and of the impact our often unintentional, unknowing attitudes and patterns of behaviour have upon others, and which serve to exclude a wider group of people from joining our churches than we might at first think.



'Moonlight Spiritual' by Bernard Hoyes

As a result of engaging with the Living in Love & Faith resources over the coming months and years, it is hoped that our church communities will have a deeper understanding of the Church's teaching on Christian living in love and faith; to have heard the voices and encountered the experiences of people who would otherwise have been invisible to us; and be equipped to engage in the public square about what it means to be human and sexual.



'Nathaniel, Asleep Under the Fig Tree' by Mark Cazalet

Rather wonderfully, the beautiful reading from the last section of the first chapter of John which we are set for this Sunday, comes to us in the second week of Epiphany, because we are being asked to think deeply about our faith in God, who came to us as the Christ-child born on Christmas Day and who offers to transform us through the riches of His grace. God-with-us as Jesus offers to renew our lives – as our Collect prayer for today says '*...to transform the poverty of our nature.*' In harmony with the hopes and the desires of the LLF teachings, we are learning to follow Jesus, who comes to show us how God has designed us to live – together, in love and acceptance of all. In this reading from John, we see the impact on Nathaniel of not being invisible to Jesus.

What Jesus asks of us all this Epiphany is to follow Him, just as He asks Philip. Jesus says '*Follow Me*' and *immediately* Philip leaves behind him his old way of life and rushes off to find his friend Nathaniel to tell him that he has met the Messiah. He says excitedly to his friend: '*We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.*'

Can you imagine that? Meeting Jesus in somewhere as ordinary as Tesco? Especially if he was wearing a COVID mask!! What would you do? Who would you want to run and tell? Well, Philip goes to his friend, Nathaniel, who, interestingly, doesn't react as Philip did. Instead, Nathaniel plays the sceptic card. Wouldn't you if one of your friends came running up to you saying they'd met Jesus down by the supermarket checkout? Frankly, in my previous career, I'd have been encouraged to consider sectioning Philip under the Mental Health Act.

Can we blame Nathaniel for his acerbic comment: *'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'* I wonder where the Nazareth equivalent would be for us today? Yet, look at the way Philip responds to his friend. He doesn't get angry with Nathaniel that he doesn't believe, he simply asks his friend to come and meet Jesus for himself.



'Nathaniel known as Bartholomew' by Anthony van Dyck

And that's right where we are this Epiphany. Jesus is asking each one of us to come and meet Him. He asks us to come and be renewed. Fortunately for Nathaniel, when he went to meet Jesus, all his pre-conceived prejudices melted away and his life was transformed. The Living in Love and Faith material is encouraging us to do something similar – to lay down our pre-conceived ideas and prejudices about people who are different from us, and see what joy we can find in and from each other. All of this is predicated on our trying to do what Jesus did with Nathaniel – to see them for who they are and to love them; recognising our equality before our Creator, who made us all in His image.

This Epiphany, Jesus asks us to think deeply about His love for us which will transform the sceptical poverty of our nature and fill us with the riches of His grace. I pray this will be the beginning of a faith-filled, trusting and inclusive journey for us all.

Yours, known and loved by Christ,

Jax
Rector, The Downs Benefice

PS: For those of you, as confused as I was, New Testament scholars are of the view that the two individuals we know from scripture to be Nathanael and Bartholomew were, in fact, one and the same person. The name Bartholomew means 'Son of Tolmai' which implies that he had another name. The name Nathanael means 'Gift of God.' It is therefore thought that Nathaniel was son of Tolmai.

Schedule of Services

As you will know, our benefice of five parishes have decided to suspend services during January in an attempt to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus.

Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, including our own recorded services. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>



Collect Prayer for The Second Sunday of Epiphany

Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



John 1: 43-51 - Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, 'Follow me.' Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told 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.'

'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Nathanael asked. 'Come and see,' said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, 'Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.'

'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.'

Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.' He then added, 'Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'