



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*17th January 2021
Second Sunday of Epiphany*

Reflection

"Come and see," the man said.

He had taken a seat near me, on the train to the backwater place where I was teaching Maths. The commute time of over one hour was very valuable reading time. On that day I was engrossed in my newly acquired copy of Jean Delumeau's *La Peur en Occident* and had just started on the chapter about eschatological fears, that is, the anxiety that the end of the world is near. My neighbour began a conversation to show his appreciation of my interest in the Last Judgement and the apocalypse.

He introduced himself as belonging to an Adventist church that was, as he put it, truly inhabited by the Holy Spirit – his own spontaneous and impassionate preaching was a testament to this. I was graciously offered a sample of his preaching, on the theme of the signs of the end of the Age. He was sure that his community was among the righteous at God's right hand, who will inherit the kingdom prepared for them. And what about me? At my still young age (I was in my early 20s), I was wearing no jewellery, no make-up, no nail varnish, my dress was simple and modest (trousers were not permitted by the communist department of education and high heels were not the best choice for treading dirt roads). And I seemed to read the most appropriate kind of stuff. So, there was some hope for me. Provided that I joined his vibrant church. Provided that I got to know and committed to 'his' Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ he had found.

"Come and see." He had picked me out to be his Nathanael. 'Where did you get to know me?', I felt an urge to ask him – his perception of me was upsettingly superficial.

I didn't refuse his invitation – but I didn't visit his church either. Out of prejudice – can anything good come out of an insignificant small town? And also because, for me, his very assertive and demonstrative faith was, at that time, not very appealing. Or, perhaps, it was intimidating.

Nathanael is intimidating with his spontaneous outburst: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” He has been for one minute with Jesus, and he can already profess two messianic titles! He seemed to have trodden already the discipleship path to its end. Or has he? We meet him again at the very end of John's Gospel, by the Sea of Tiberias, where Jesus appears to seven of his disciples, after his resurrection. On this occasion, we learn that Nathanael is from Cana – it is, therefore, quite likely, that he had witnessed the first sign of Jesus, the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Cana, which you will hear about next Sunday.

The synoptic gospels, those of Mark, Matthew and Luke, don't mention Nathanael, whose name means “God has given”. In the ancient list of the Twelve disciples, which these gospels provide, we have the name of Bartholomew, preceded very often by Philip. ‘Bartholomew’ is a patronymic, with a clear reference to his father's name: “bar Talmay” meaning “son of Talmay”. As there is no narrative of Bartholomew's calling by Jesus, and he appears to be among the first disciples, he has been traditionally identified as Nathanael.

There is no information about Nathanael-Bartholomew's apostolic activity. According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, traces of Bartholomew's presence had been discovered in India. The Armenian church consider him to be their founder, alongside Jude Thaddeus. Later tradition of his death by flaying became very popular. His relics were brought to Western Europe, and, in the 11th century, Canterbury Cathedral was presented with one of his arms.

It is a rather beautiful acknowledgement for someone who has lived his attachment to Jesus Christ and has witnessed to him without performing sensational deeds.

Whether Nathanael has actually travelled to India – we cannot know. Jesus had promised him a journey, one that was much more extraordinary. “You will see greater things [than being seen by the Messiah under a fig tree]. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Nathanael might have thought he was to travel to Bethel, the place where Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, had had a vision of a ladder reaching into heaven, with angels ascending and descending. With the coming of Jesus, that place, named ‘God's house’ was no longer a place where God opens a gate for humankind to have a glimpse of his glory: Jesus, as the Son of Man, becomes the fulfilment of Jacob's vision, the ongoing connection between

heaven and earth, the manifestation of God's glory among us and the ascending of our humanity towards the Father.

John's Gospel makes it clear that this fulfilment happens at the very moment of Christ's crucifixion – the disciples' journey shall conform them to Christ crucified, in a permanent and renewed conversion to God.

The early Renaissance mystic Catherine of Siena thought of the cross carrying Jesus' body as a ladder to heaven, on which she could climb toward God, raising from humility to obedience to peace.

According to John, Nathanael-Bartholomew was granted an encounter with the resurrected Christ. And according to Luke, he was a witness to the Ascension. He has perceived God's new creation, the grace of God made manifest and available to all.

In the Sistine Chapel, in Rome, Michelangelo has painted Bartholomew at the centre of what it is, perhaps, the most dramatic representation of the Last Judgement. In his left hand, Bartholomew holds his flayed skin, hanging between heaven and hell. The face on the skin is the tragic and anguished self-portrait of the artist. Michelangelo's face is placed on a line that passes through Jesus' pierced side, the crown of thorns and the place on the cross where the 'titulus', the inscription bearing Jesus' name and the title of 'King of the Jews', had been. At the same time, Bartholomew determinedly turns his face to behold, with new eyes, God. Christ's life-giving glance, directed to the disciple, keeps him afloat in the vertiginous cosmic drama that surrounds him.

In a poem written at about the time when he was working at the Last Judgement, Michelangelo pleaded:

“[Lord] stretch out thy pitying arms to me, take me
Out of me, make me one that pleases Thee.”

It could have been Nathanael's prayer after receiving Jesus's promise. A disciple's journey begins with recognising something of Jesus's identity (in the first chapter of John's Gospel, not one disciple articulates Jesus' identity in the same way: Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel ...) – Jesus is always revealing himself to us in new ways. The disciple's journey will be transformative, as one needs to be freed of the old 'skin' and to accept to be wrapped up in Christ's life. Some will shed into charismatic leaders and passionate preachers. Yet others will be so transformed that their paths model the humble one that Catherine of Siena wanted to take. Contemplative Nathanael, who had longed for peace and consolation in the shade of a fig tree, might have walked this way.

John's Gospel begins with an invitation: “Come and see”. This is the deepest call to the journey towards being fully and deeply human in Jesus Christ. A call to share in his prophetic,

priestly and royal mission. A call that more often than not will bring one to feel unsettled, bewildered, vulnerable, wounded. As each of us has infinite worth for God, he will come to find us in the darkest places of our lives, when our eyesight begins to grow dim and our hope to hear his voice falters. He will persistently speak to us, he will faithfully keep his lamp burning. He will encompass us behind and before and lay his hand upon us.

May we awake to the God of promise and invitation who knows and calls our names, and longs for us to listen. 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Amen.

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