

Sermon for Sunday 14 January 2024 – The Second Sunday of Epiphany

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1 Samuel 3.1-10, Psalm 139.1-9, Revelation 5.1-10, John 1.43-51

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

So we are in Epiphany-tide. Epiphany-tide, when we remember Jesus being revealed as Christ to the Gentiles with the visit of the magi, which we looked at last week, but also the revealing of Jesus's glory. It's also known as the season of glory.

And we are in John's Gospel today. John's Gospel, frequently described as the gospel of glory. It is a thread that runs right through the gospel of John, right from the beginning, no pun intended, because John's gospel starts with 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God. And the word was God.' John, in the prologue, the end of the prologue, 'The word became flesh, lived among us, and we have seen his glory.'

The Hebrew word for glory is a word I love, Kabod. It's a great word to say. It just rolls off the tongue nicely. Kabod. You may be more familiar with the Greek term, Doxa, from where we get doxology, but what does it mean? Some blank faces, some people looking at the floor because they think, I'm going to pick on them to answer the question. It has this idea in the Hebrew of visible splendour. And the word Doxa, in the Greek, in its normal use, didn't mean that, and John here has adopted this Greek word Doxa, but is using sort of the Hebrew thought, it changed its meaning, so its biblical use is different to its everyday use. It means something like visible splendour, honour, reputation, the glory.

Now with our gospel passage this morning, where Jesus has found Philip, and Philip has then gone off and said, we've found the Messiah and he's found Nathaniel, you may be expecting a sermon on, well, we now need to do what Philip did and go and find people and bring them to Jesus. Who's heard sermons like that before? Who even remembers hearing a sermon like that before? Who's forgotten all the sermons they've ever heard? Yeah! I want to put another idea to you, because so often that just seems like, oh, we've got to go and do something, and we're using the Bible like a manual. Philip did this; Philip went and found Nathaniel, so we've got to go and do likewise.

Many years ago, I spent some time in the fashion industry, and twice a year we would change; we would shut the store for two, three days; we would turn around to the spring season or the autumn season (the summer and winter just sort of gradually got filtered in) and we would have to wear the clothes. And it was quite interesting for those of you who remember when we were the darling of the high street, I worked for Next, and we did some crazy things, like we put stripes and checks and spots together. Do you remember those days, those of you? Yeah? But we would get excited about some of the clothes because they looked good, they fitted well, and other clothes we weren't so excited about.

Have a guess which one we sold more of. There's always one, isn't there? We sold more of the ones that we were excited about because when customers came in and they were looking at them going, we might be wearing them. Oh, yes, we've been wearing them. These are lovely to wear. Would you like to try it on?

And I want to suggest that the way we might invite people to meet Jesus, if we ourselves are excited about meeting Jesus, and then naturally we will just talk to people about Jesus with no sense that we've got to do it. I'm going to suggest that one of the ways that we might be encouraged in our faith and to talk about Jesus to those people who don't already know is to see something of his glory. And I want to very briefly look at how the gospel passage might show that. You may want to have your pew sheet to hand.

So what's been happening? In John's gospel, we've had the prologue, 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God' that we heard at Christmas. Then John the Baptist has pointed out to his disciples, Jesus, the lamb of God. And then some of his disciples have started following Jesus. So first of all, that is Andrew, and then Peter, Simon Peter. And then we have Philip and he goes and finds Nathaniel. And Jesus sees Nathaniel coming to him and says something quite strange, 'an israelite in whom there is no deceit'. I wonder why he says that. There is a clue at the end of the passage that we read.

You haven't got verse numbers. 51, it's the end of passage; 'and Jesus said to Nathaniel, very truly, I tell you (but that's actually in the plural, we'll come to that in a minute), and you'll see heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. Who knows their Old Testament? What might this be referring to? Any ideas? Did I hear Jacob, hey, go to the top of the class, Jacob's ladder. And I don't mean the song by Bruce Hornsby or Huey Lewis, for those of you who have decent taste in music. Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, was a deceiver, a huckster as the Americans would say, a trickster. He had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright. He then had to flee because Esau was wanting to kill him. And in a dream, he has a dream of a ladder going from heaven to earth and angels descending up and down it, much as we might go up into our loft with a ladder. Yeah? Jacob; his name means 'deceiver'.

Do you see how when Jesus sees Nathaniel and he says, an Israelite who has no deceit, we're already getting a little indicator that Jesus is alluding to the story of Jacob? It's easy to miss it. But then Jesus, at the end, says to Nathaniel, after this encounter where he says, 'I saw you underneath the fig tree'. And for some reason that triggers in Nathaniel this understanding that here is the chosen one of God, here is the Christ, here is the Messiah that Israel had been waiting for.

But then Jesus explains. You (and it's as the Americans say, y'all, it's plural, so he's talking to Nathaniel, but probably then to the disciples around him), you'll all see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. Upon me. What's he doing there? Jesus, right at the beginning of John's account of his ministry, of Jesus's ministry is pointing forward to the cross, because the ladder in Jacob's dream allowed heaven and earth to interact. And the means by which heaven and earth interact is through the cross, through the death and resurrection, through the death and exaltation of

Jesus. It is the route for us between heaven and earth. We don't, as one of my colleagues in college said, we don't interact with heaven by jumping on a pogo stick. I don't quite know what they'd had for breakfast that morning, but we don't interact with heaven by jumping up and down on a pogo stick and hoping to get there. We interact via the cross.

Throughout John's gospel, there is a thread about Jesus being lifted up. And I think of this a bit like a ladder. You take a ladder, you lift it up against a wall. You lift it up, tip it up. John 3.14 & 15, just before the very famous verse, 'God so loved the world', says this, 'no one has ascended into heaven except one who descended from heaven'.

You get this idea, this two way direction. No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the son of man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Had we read on a little bit in our reading from Revelation, we had heard the angels and the elders talking about Jesus being glorified because he was the lamb who had been slaughtered, but who was now alive. The glory of Jesus, the visible splendour of Jesus, is his death on the cross, his resurrection and his ascension. And in that, Jesus says to Nathaniel, this is what's going to happen and this is what you will see.

I wonder whether if we saw more of the splendour of our Lord Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection and what that achieves by way of our ability to commune with heaven, we, like Philip, would go and find people and say, we have found the chosen one. Come and see.

I said a few weeks ago that one of the things with the shepherds, when they brought the account of what the angels had said to them, people were amazed. Maybe we need to spend time being amazed about what the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ was in the death on the cross and his resurrection. And that may motivate us to tell others. Amen.