

Sermon for Epiphany 2 2021
Psalm 139:1-10/John 1:43-51

There are three things that I want to draw out of our readings today and each of them probably deserves an entire sermon on its own. So it is a lot to pack in to a short space of time, but I hope that at least one, if not all, of the things that I talk about will encourage you to reflect in the coming few days. I hope that you will come back to them and maybe go deeper on your own. As always, the sermon will be available on the church websites.

Psalm 139 famously gives us this wonderful picture of what it is to be known by God. It is something that I talk about often because it was only really when I began to understand more about what it means to be fully known by and completely loved by God that my life began to be transformed – and that was after I had been a Christian a good many years! The beginning of our Gospel reading from John is also about being known and understood. We are told that Jesus found Philip, the inference isn't that He just came upon him, but that He actively sought Philip out. And then Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus and Jesus told Nathanael things about himself that so amazed Him that he was convinced that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel.

The idea of being completely known isn't always such a comfortable one though is it? Although we know with one part of our minds that God knows everything, at the same time I think we all have thoughts and desires from time to time which we like to pretend we can hide from Him. I don't believe that there can be many people who never have a secret thought that they actually would not ever want to admit to anyone, let alone God. But He knows, and He forgives, if we are made right with Him through the righteousness of the death and resurrection of Jesus then we have nothing to fear. As long as we own those things and are sorry for them, as long as we are willing to say, as the psalmist says at the end of this inspiring psalm, "search

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me O God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Of course, it is true that God knows the hearts of every person and if anyone is not made right with Him, if anyone tries to hide from Him or denies Him, then as the writer of Hebrews warns, “It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God”. How terrible, how terrifying it would be to finally realise that God knows every secret of your heart if you didn’t also know how much He loves you and longs to forgive you.

So, we are known and loved in the very deepest part of our being and wholly loved in a way that if we allow it to can bring about incredible healing and wholeness in our lives.

Coming back to Philip, when Jesus found him, He said to him, “Follow me”. Well of course none of the disciples at that stage had any idea what it was going to mean to follow Jesus. It was a common thing for a Rabbi to gather followers around him who would live with him and learn from him. The first disciples may well have felt honoured to be called, some of them after all were only humble fishermen, but none of them really understood who He was and what would happen. But the first thing that Philip did as a newly called follower of Jesus was to find his friend Nathanael and bring him to Jesus – “come and see”, he said to him. We all have different gifts, both natural and spiritual (and they often overlap), some of us are more extrovert, some more introvert, but the response that all of us should have, when we realise that we are fully known, fully loved and called to follow Jesus, is to bring others to see what we have seen. Evangelism may not be our particular gifting and calling, but we are all called to share the Good News of God’s love. That should just be a part of who we are. That is not to say that it is always easy, the enemy loves to taunt us with embarrassment, awkwardness and the

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threat that we will be laughed at or though badly of. But even if that were to happen, and it might, what is that compared with the incredible richness of the love that He has lavished upon us?

The third thing that I want to talk about is this strange exchange between Jesus and Nathanael. Jesus said to Nathanael, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”. What a strange thing to say, you might think that Jesus would talk about miracles of healing, or raising people from the dead as the most amazing thing that the disciples would see, but no – He uses this picture of angels ascending and descending. When Jesus said, “you shall see greater things than that”, the you has become plural – He is widening out the conversation and including all of the disciples not just Nathanael. The image of course, I am sure you all know is the one of Jacob in the desert. The point about Jacob’s dream was that it showed that God was there with him in the desert, in that moment there was a link between heaven and Jacob. Of course, Jesus Himself became the link between us and heaven. Jacob called that place Bethel, which means God’s house. And later on Bethel became a sanctuary, an important place where the early Israelites worshipped God. The tradition arose that when you worship God in His house then He is really present with you – there is a link between you and heaven. Later this belief became very much focussed on the Temple and especially on the Holy of Holies, where God’s presence was to be found. Each of the Gospels has different things that they emphasise. One of the things that John focusses on is the promises in the old testament about the Temple, and going beyond them to show that there is now a new way to worship and be in the presence of God. Right at the beginning we get a glimpse of this

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when he tells us that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. God's very presence dwelling among us, Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus later told His disciples, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except through me". In the New Jerusalem there is no temple. God dwells with His people. Through His death and resurrection Jesus opened that link between us and heaven. We don't need to worship in the Temple, His presence is not found in a building. Jesus told us that He would never leave us, we are in His presence, He is in us and we are in Him and we stand below an open heaven. I know that it doesn't always feel that way, that is why we cannot rely on our feelings alone, but on what we know to be true and on our past experience. We may not always feel God's presence with us, in the person of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, but that does not change the fact that we are. It is as He promised, He is with us always.

So, we are wholly known and wholly loved.

We are therefore called to bring others to know and experience this love. And Jesus has opened a way, is Himself the open way between ourselves and heaven, and we can worship wherever we are because His presence is always with us.

Amen