

Sermon Archive 183

Sunday 14 January, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 1: 43-51

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The question is “can anything good come out of Nazareth?” The answer is “yes”. The sermon could end there, but . . .

-ooOoo-

I doubt that the question, as first put by Nathanael, was asked as a serious one. It comes across more like a flippant, throw-away line - a wry way of saying “I don’t think so” and shutting down a suggestion that’s been made. Nathanael’s friend, Philip, says he thinks he’s found the “One” - the one their faith tradition had been seeking for thousands of years. “This is he whom seers and sages sought of old, with one accord, whom the scriptures of the prophets promised in their faithful word. Now he shines, the long-expected; let creation praise its Lord” - And we found him just up the road, in Nazareth.

When Nathanael asks “can anything good come out of Nazareth”, it’s not that there’s anything wrong with Nazareth. It’s got no reputation like Sodom, Gomorrah, or Nineveh - no notoriety. It’s just a little town, like dozens of other little towns in the area. Quite ordinary. And that’s what Nathanael’s question touches on: it’s about the ordinary - and how the ordinary isn’t really where God properly fits. For everyone knows, don’t they, that holy things, godly things, spiritually significant things, come from somewhere else, express something else. We’ve developed a whole language to describe God’s distance. We sing of the immortal, the invisible. We speak of transcendence, and the numinous. We coin words like “ineffable”, words like “heaven”. And even at Christmas time, when we’re telling stories that are meant to focus on God’s being born among us (into the human condition), we can’t help ourselves. Above the stable, way above the genuine smells of farm and fleas, we put angels in the sky - “glory to God in the highest heaven”. That’s where the legitimating praise is sounded. That’s where God is recognised. That’s where the obviously spiritual stuff belongs - above, beyond, outside our experience. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Nathanael’s question, in an

unguarded, throw-away instant, reveals our struggle to locate God within the real.

Within the real, as Philip looked at “Jesus from Nazareth”, I wonder what he saw - what caused him to voice his tender new expression of faith (“we have found him”). And I wonder how it would have felt for him to have that infant stirring of faith become the brunt of a witty throw-away put-down. I can imagine feeling hurt, getting defensive, walking away. Or I can imagine surging forward, giving a big long speech about what I’d seen, what the scriptures say, why my judgment is compelling. Persevering! Isn’t that what many subsequent evangelists have done! (One such evangelist in the Octagon, Dunedin, some years ago, was found to be shouting at me, crying out that God would damn me for dismissing his testimony!)

Avoiding any of that, Philip simply invites Nathanael to “come and see”. Coming and seeing wouldn’t be very likely to produce much if God isn’t to be found in Nazareth - if God can only be discerned through climbing into heaven, through certain spiritual ways of perceiving, through slightly magical, other-worldly ways of being aware. But if God *is* getting expressed in Nazareth, what better approach could one take than to “go and see”? To use these eyes, these ears, these very human ways of exploring the ordinary. To look, to listen, to think, to feel. To speak and be spoken to, to consider. To meet, to touch, to smell. To use these senses, these ordinary gifts of awareness with which we have been endowed. But as Nathanael says, there’s no great need here, since good is unlikely to come out of Nazareth.

As good *does* comes out of Nazareth and first appears to Nathanael, it greets him. While he’s still some distance off, Nathanael hears Jesus paying him a compliment. Other people might have been describing the author of the Nazareth question as a cynic, a flippant dismitter of possibilities. Jesus describes him as “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit”. The “Israelite” bit reminds Nathanael that he belongs to a people who have been looking for God, wrestling with God, for a long time. He belongs to the line of “Moses and the prophets”. It is proper for him, it is part of his inheritance, to “go and see” - to walk with open eyes. In beginning this journey, in following his flippant put-down with a willingness to “look and listen”, he’s being true to his cultural DNA. Goodness reminds him of his identity - that he’s one of the journeying people of God. Yet not only is he an Israelite, a person of the journey, he’s an Israelite *in whom there is no deceit*. He’s a straight up person. A person who

says what everyone else is thinking but is too frightened to say. Good greets Nathanael with a generous description of his character. He calls him honest and brave. The first thing Nathanael notices as he “goes and sees” is that good identifies the good in him. The good is kind to him, kind about him. The good praises him when it could have delivered a critical judgment. (Were you being rude about my home town?) That’s the first part of the encounter.

Since “no good can come out of Nazareth”, I guess Nathanael needs to brush off any early expression of the good. So he responds to the compliment with another question. “You say that I am good, but where did you get to know me?” The implication of the question, of course, is that Jesus doesn’t know him well enough to have paid him that compliment. Good has overstepped its actual knowledge, its line of competence. Good has ended up in the realm of insincere flattery. Good, actually, doesn’t know what’s talking about. Whatever it is that’s coming out of Nazareth, it’s not the good. Stop there, good! And come no closer!

As good continues its way out of Nazareth, Jesus assures Nathanael that he knows him very well. He has been seeing him from even before Philip first spoke to him. (“I saw you under the fig tree” says Jesus.) And the words that Jesus uses, “I saw you” are the same words used to describe what Nathanael is doing - *seeing*. So Nathanael is challenged to consider this: that while he has been willing to search for the One, the One has already searched for him. While he has gone into a process of looking, listening, evaluating (deciding whether he will believe), the One already has looked, listened, evaluated, and decided to believe in *him* - to consider him worthy, to give him the description of an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Nathanael has been judged by a very wise eye, and found worthy of welcome.

Is there something in the good, that allows us to understand that we are noticed, that we are known? Is there something in the good that allows us, in the midst of the insecurities that tend us towards flippancy and the dismissing of hope, to receive a deeper understanding of who we are – noticed and embraced? Is there something in the good that says “you are not alone”? “Even when you thought you were alone under the fig tree, I was seeing you and forming my compliment.”

Nathanael changes his mind about Nazareth. He now believes that something very good has come from there. And as he joins Philip in believing that the long-expected One has been found, good extends one further gift. Good says to him “you are going to see amazing things. It will be as if angels have broken into your world and started dancing.” Good encourages the search. It gives expectation. It assures that there is plenty more to see.

Can good come out of Nazareth? Yes, it can. From the ordinary emerges the beautiful. It greets. It is kind. It opens itself to the seeing, hearing, thinking and feeling. It knows and is known. It reveals itself to the senses, to the ordinary gifts of awareness with which we are endowed. It shows where it really belongs. Does the good belong among *us*? Yes, it does. Can it be seen? By those who “come and see”, yes it can. If you see people greeting one another, if you notice them being kind to one another, if you see them understanding themselves more fully, if you join them with face and hands and presence in celebrating our “not being alone”, then good is coming from Nazareth. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Yes, it can. It has, and it can.

-ooOoo-

That was a much longer sermon than the first one, but I have one final thought about Nathanael! He gets no further mention in John’s gospel until right near the end, where he’s reported as doing nothing remarkable. He’s not mentioned at all in the other three gospels. In the wider story, he’s practically invisible. If there were a human equivalent of the small town of Nazareth - unremarkable, easy to miss, then that equivalent might well be Nathanael. Nathanael - the human expression of Nazareth. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Yes, it can. Out of the ordinary can emerge the beautiful, the creative, the redemptive. So if I am ordinary, if I do not feel especially equipped for achieving sacred things, if I feel like a silly little town out of which no good shall come, I need to re-ask the question: can anything good come out of Nazareth? **Can** it? Yes, it can.

In the name of Jesus, who came out of Nazareth. Amen.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.