

Sermon - searched out and known

Based on 1 Samuel 3.1-10, Psalm 139.1-5,12-18, and John 1.43-51 (NRSV)

Psalm 139 - a favourite

- Our psalm response provides an effective description of today's theme:
Lord, you search me out and know me.
- Psalm 139 is one of my favourites, because it is beautifully poetic, and it describes the intimate relationship God has with me, inviting me to acknowledge and respond to him.
- Verses 9 and 10, not included amongst those set for this morning, I find particularly special.
- I first encountered them in a little Gideon's New Testament I was given as a youngster, which included the Psalms and Proverbs.
- The wording of that version, the American Standard Version, has stuck with me:
*If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me. (ASV, Ps 139.9-10)*
- As a child I found it easier to cope with the world by retreating into my imagination.
- My teachers frequently complained of me being 'somewhere else', of being a day-dreamer.
- So these verses spoke powerfully to me that even when I had escaped the world in my mind, that God was ahead of me even in that place.
- That there was nowhere I could go where God was not already waiting for me, to reassure me with his loving kindness.
- Later on when I was married with children, and found myself disconcerted about moving to the UK, these verses were a reassurance about moving literally overseas.
- After seven years there when I was wrestling with the idea of being called to minister in Australia, these verses spoke powerfully to me again, reassuring me that if I were to *take the wings of the morning* - that is, to go eastward - *and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea* - that is, to go to one of the places furthest from England - then God would continue to lead me and give me his care.

God's intimate relationship with each person

- So the writer of Psalm 139 composes this hymn of praise to our intimate God, as the psalmist acknowledges how God relates to them personally and directly.
*O Lord, you have searched me out and known me,
you are acquainted with all my ways.
You knew my soul
when I was formed in secret.
How deep are your thoughts to me, O God. (cf vv 1, 2, 14, 17)*
- This was recognised as being true not just for that psalmist, but true for all people.
- Our faith is one that is both communal and personal.
- This is why, in the Eucharist at the time the consecrated bread is broken, we participate in saying:
*We who are many are one body,
for we all share in the one bread.*
- Being a Christian - that is, a disciple and follower of Jesus - is about sharing in our faith together.
- Nevertheless, as the writer of Psalm 139 reminds us, being a member of the Church, the body of Christ, is also about having a personal faith relationship with God.
- And this psalm reminds us that it is God who knows us before we get to know God.

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- It is God who knows us before we know ourselves, and who is more aware of our actions, and motives, and thoughts and desires, than we are ourselves.
- The psalmist invites us to join in with acknowledging God's intimate knowledge of ourselves, and consequent love, care, and compassion that God has personally for each one of us.
- Knowing about God's personal interest in each of us is something that we need to learn.
- And likewise, we need to learn how to acknowledge and respond to God's love.
- This is where we need friends, and teachers, and mentors, who will help and enable us.
- This is what our two Scripture stories speak of today: first Eli teaching Samuel, and then Philip calling - and Jesus teaching - Nathanael.

Samuel - learning to respond

- The reading from the first book of Samuel, describes how *'The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.'* (1 Samuel 3.1)
- I suggest that it was not because God wasn't loving, or blessing, or speaking to people, but rather because people weren't learning about, or listening to, or paying attention to God.
- The story of the boy Samuel shows a youngster who was sensitive to God's presence and God's word, but who was not yet able to recognise that for what it was.
- Only when the old prophet Eli taught Samuel who it was who was calling him within himself, and taught him how to respond - only then was Samuel able to acknowledge God's call, and respond to God's word.
- Samuel learnt - to quote Psalm 139 - that God had already *encompassed him behind and before, and had laid his hand upon him* - that God had already established an intimate relationship with Samuel, and was inviting the unknowing Samuel to respond.
- Consequently, Samuel grew up to be a man who wielded the word of God to great effect, initially anointing Saul to be the first king of Israel, and then subsequently anointing David to be the great king of Israel - the start of the royal dynasty from which Jesus would come to be the ultimate king.

Philip invites Nathanael

- Which brings us to today's Gospel passage, in which Jesus calls some more of his first disciples.
- It is helpful to look at the sequence of connections that occurred before this encounter.
- Last Sunday we observed the baptism of Jesus, at the hands of his cousin, John the Baptist.
- John tells two of his own disciples *'Look, here is the Lamb of God'* (John 1.36), and points to Jesus, and so these two become followers of Jesus instead.
- One of them is Andrew, who goes to his brother Simon, and says *'We have found the Christ'* (John 1.41) - the one anointed by God - and takes Simon to Jesus, who nicknames him Peter.
- We don't know how Philip and Jesus meet, but the gospel makes a point of describing Philip as from the same village as Andrew and Peter, and so we can surmise that the meeting between Philip and Jesus is intentional.
- Philip then goes to Nathanael, and invites him to meet Jesus.
- Nathanael comes across as a sceptic, in that he doesn't take things at face value.
- He is someone who looks deeper, who has a well developed insight into who people are beneath the surface, and probably has a well-developed sense of intuition -
- the kind of person that you would have a hard time convincing about anything.
- His scepticism, and perhaps his prejudice, is evident in his response: *'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'* (John 1.46)
- But even though he's a sceptic, he is nevertheless open to being persuaded.

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- He doesn't expect to be convinced, but he is prepared to see for himself what his friend Philip, and the others, seem to be enthusiastic about.

Jesus' revelation to Nathanael

- We are then given a curious bit of dialogue between Nathanael and Jesus.
- Jesus says: *'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'* (John 1.47)
 - In this statement Jesus was acknowledging Nathanael to be a member of God's people, but in an honourable way - someone who didn't take for granted the covenant God had made with Israel - that is, with Jacob, as he was first known.
 - Further, while his ancestor Jacob was a deceiver, Nathanael is praised for both having no deceit of his own and for being able to see through deceit.
- Nathanael asks, *'Where did you come to know me?'* (John 1.48)
 - He can see that Jesus already has him figured out - that Jesus appears to have some intimate knowledge of the kind of person Nathanael is, rather like the Psalmist says that God already has intimate knowledge of the kind of person each one of us is.
- Jesus answers: *'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'* (John 1.48)
 - Here Jesus is referencing the scripture passages of Micah 4.4 and Zechariah 3.10, when being able to sit under the fig tree was a sign of peace and well-being, indicators that the Messiah was enacting God's kingdom of heaven on earth.
 - Jewish traditions that developed after those prophets also pictured rabbis under fig trees studying and teaching the Torah - the scriptures containing God's law.
 - So in this phrase, Jesus is letting Nathanael know that Jesus understood him as someone who was a searcher of God's word, looking forward to the Messianic age.
 - And that Jesus knew this about Nathanael even before Philip had called him to be a follower of Jesus.
 - Again, this reminds us of Psalm 139:

*O Lord, you have searched me out and known me:
you comprehend my thoughts long before.
you are acquainted with all my ways. (cf vv 1,2)*
 - And so the new disciple of Jesus, the one who sees through deceit, and who therefore can see the underlying truth more easily, sees Jesus for who *he* is - at least, with a greater level of comprehension than others do.
- He responds in open acknowledgement: *'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'* (John 1.49)

Responding to God, in and through Jesus

- Jesus tells Nathanael that as his faith matures, he will comprehend more and more.
- He then refers to the dream that Jacob had when he left home to seek his fortune, in which he saw a stairway between earth and God in heaven with angels ascending and descending upon it (Genesis 28.12), and in which God reassured Jacob that he would be with him and bless him.
- When Jacob awoke he then acknowledged both God's presence and God's personal relationship with him - just like in Psalm 139.
- And now Jesus, in referring to Jacob's dream, describes the angels - symbols of communication with God - ascending and descending not on a staircase, but more significantly on the Son of Man, Jesus himself.
- Jesus is indicated as being fundamental to each disciple's own faith relationship with God - both his early disciples, and his later ones, like us who are learning now.

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- And as we progress, Sunday by Sunday, through the gospel account of Jesus' ministry, we can see how, through Jesus, God continues to search us out, and show his love and care and compassion for each of us, in ways that are both intimate, and also beyond our full comprehension.
- And so, week by week, we come together as the community of Christ, to be reminded of his love for us, and to acknowledge that and give thanks, and to be encouraged to share that with others, just as Eli did with Samuel, and as Philip did with Nathanael.