

Second Sunday of Epiphany 2017 (pm)

(Ezekiel 2.1 – 3.4); John 1: 43 – end

There's nothing like a good story; and, of course, Christmas abounds in narrative. The Christmas story works at every level. It captures the imagination; it stirs the heart; and it packs a real theological punch that God is with us.

But now is the time – even though we do have this evening the story of Nathaniel sitting under the fig tree – it is nevertheless the time not so much for telling stories but for having some spiritual reflection. John's Gospel gets right on with it. No faffing about with stories of shepherds and angels or anything like that. Just material for us to work on as we begin to apply the Christmas story with our Epiphany reflection.

Epiphany is the season – four weeks of it after the 12 days of Christmas – to think about what is revealed through Jesus. This evening's Gospel reading about

the calling of Philip and Nathaniel, in the very first chapter of John – is like a compendium of titles or descriptions of Jesus: Son of God, King of Israel, him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.

These are sign posts that point us towards what's going on with Jesus. But they're no more than sign posts. They are not statements of Christian doctrine. They are the signs that were followed by those who wanted to work out the Church's doctrine; and they led to the statements of doctrine that we have in our creeds and so on and which were only arrived at three or four hundred years later.

So we're not going to come to any conclusions about Jesus from this passage: this is the stuff out of which conclusions come to be drawn. And that means that this evening there are no arguments, there are no propositions to get our heads round and try to understand and decide whether we agree with them or

not. That comes, not when we're celebrating the Eucharist together on a Sunday evening, but when we're sitting in a theology seminar, looking at the creeds and seeing how the guys who wrote them used this stuff to justify the propositions they came up with.

All we need to take on board, from the context of hearing this Gospel proclaimed in worship, is that when we're dealing with Jesus, we're standing on holy ground. We're dealing with someone who can have mystical insight about the fact that Nathaniel was sitting under a fig tree. We're dealing with someone to whom spiritual titles can be applied; about whom doctrine can be created; and through whom we are drawn into a God-centred view of life.

That's because what these titles are telling us is that it is the assumption on which the Gospel is based that everything that happens with Jesus is the activity of God. It sees everything that happens as being God's action. That's the genius of the prophets. They could

look at everything that happened – the ordinary stuff, the domestic stuff, the commercial stuff, the military stuff – and they could detect and articulate the presence of God in it. This is the nature of the faith John's Gospel invites us to share. It is the faith of the community that came into being when Jacob had spent the night wrestling with an angel; after which night he became Israel; on which night a ladder, or ramp, became established to provide inter-connection between heaven and earth; between the sacred and the profane.

Jesus is the ultimate exemplar, the fulfilment, the completion of that tradition of faith. He provides the ladder, the ramp, the inter-connection between heaven and earth. He will create the meshing together of things sacred and profane.

I know "profane" is a dodgy word. I once sang Bartok's Cantata Profana in Chester Cathedral and there was a hue and outcry and letters to the local

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

paper because people thought we were going to stand in the Cathedral singing profanities, singing rude and offensive words. All the title meant that it wasn't sacred music: it was in fact a setting of a hunting story from Hungarian folk-lore.

And that's the sense in which I'm using the word profane. Jesus provides an inter-connection between things sacred and profane. Nothing is exclusively religious; nothing is exclusively non-religious. We don't have neat categories of the sacred and the non-sacred. Because of the faith Jesus draws us into, everything we do is to be understood spiritually, or theologically, or through the lens of that faith.

How we shop, how we relate to everyday events and encounters - never mind how we vote and the view we take on the big issues of the day – are all informed and shaped by this inter-connectedness because, as Jesus told Nathaniel, when we see Jesus, we see “heaven

opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Amen.