

Third Sunday of Lent 2019 (24.03.19)

Evensong

Genesis 28: 10 – 19a; John 1: 35 – 51

OK: spoiler alert for people doing this year's Lent course: there is a little snippet in this week's episode of Jimmy McGovern's Broken when the Police Officers are submitting their statements about the fatal shooting of paranoid schizophrenic; there are inconsistencies; and "Don't worry" says there the officer in charge "if there are inconsistencies at this stage" (with a rather sinister emphasis on "at this stage"); and then as an aside says "Not even the Gospels agree with each other."

He may well have had this evening's New Testament lesson in mind when he said it. Because St John's Gospel's account, which we've heard this evening, of how Jesus acquired his disciples is completely inconsistent with the other Gospels'. In Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus calls the fishermen to follow

him: the initiative comes from him and they respond. And there's a very important theological message in that. We become Christians as a result of a divine command. We don't weigh it up and decide are we convinced/ are we not convinced? Do we fancy it/ don't we fancy it? Can we be bothered/ can't we be bothered? It's nothing to do with us. Jesus calls us – full stop. The only question is whether we are obedient or disobedient. But when we are obedient it is because we are following him and being led on the path into which he is leading us.

John's account is different, even though it is later in John's Gospel that we have these words attributed to Jesus: you did not choose me: I chose you. Nevertheless in John's account of Jesus acquiring his disciples he does not call them. They look for him, and when they've found him, they bear witness to him by ascribing a title to him: rabbi, messiah, Son of God, King of Israel.

So, if we were a court of law trying to determine just what Jesus' modus operandi for recruiting disciples was, we'd be left with entirely unsatisfactory evidence. Luckily that doesn't matter. We're not a court of law. We don't have to decide which account is correct and who's got it wrong. We don't even have to decide whether there an academically coherent account emerging or not.

Scripture operates in a different way. It does not present material for us to judge. It simply speaks God's word to us. The truth of God is revealed, not by its rational coherence and consistency, but through the Spirit. It's not a question of either/or – is it Matthew, Mark and Luke's version or John's? – it can be a both/and. There is indeed an important truth that there is a divine command on the life of each one of us and we are called to respond to that call at no matter whatever personal cost it may be to us.

But, at the same time, complementarily, it is part and parcel of the experience of the Christian life that we come across Jesus and must name him. The fear is that we don't have the spiritual imagination and open heartedness to recognise the Christ when we see him.

In this evening's reading, Nathaniel was not expecting the one "about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" to be a home spun teacher from a provincial backwater like Nazareth. We can only speculate what he was expecting. Perhaps he was expecting the product of a prestigious rabbinical school in Jerusalem.

If part of what being a Christina is all about is being people who look for Jesus, who look for Christ-likeness, and then name it, proclaim it and bear witness to it; I wonder whether we make the same error as Nathaniel. I wonder whether the places we expect to meet Jesus are all too predictable, all too respectable, all too politely religious and overlook the

fact that Jesus surprises us again and again by turning up where we least expect him: in brokenness and pain and squalor.

But this is well worn territory. So let's reflect on the naming him when we find him bit. In the story those who look for Jesus use a variety of term to be witness to who and what he is: rabbi, messiah, Son of God, King of Israel. They're all terms you might apply to Jesus and no doubt they all reflect the type of things people were saying about him at the time John's Gospel was written. None of them quite measure up to the climactic words Jesus uses to describe himself when he speaks to Nathaniel. Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man.

Now, this description *is* climactic in the narrative of the passage we've read, but we mustn't get too hung up on the actual words. These are just interim words. John's Gospel doesn't have a fully worked through formula to crack this nut, square this circle and deftly

articulate that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. That didn't get worked out until centuries later with ecumenical councils producing creeds and all the rest of it. But the point is not the formulation of the words: it's the fact that it is *upon* the Son of Man that "the angels of God ascend and descend." And it's not the first time we've heard that this evening. Because the angels ascended and descended on Jacob's ladder in the first lesson as well.

Jesus is God's man, just as Jacob was God's man and the whole of Israel whom he personified are God's people. It is, and always has been, in the nature of God that there is a point of contact on earth with things divine. God did not change his nature for 30+ years and walk about on earth inside the container of a human body. God, during the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, was as he always has been and always will be. The life of Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme revelation and expression of that. Because of Jesus we know that that point of contact is in unlikely humans.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

Because of Jesus we know that angels ascend and descend in all places and at all times. Because of Jesus it must be our hope that, when we are propelled from worship into lives of service, we will be less short sighted and less narrow minded than Nathaniel and be able to see heaven opening right before our eyes, whether we're expecting it or not.

Amen.