

When Jesus Meets the Sinner

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY [b] January 14, 2018

JOHN 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."
⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see Heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.

"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you,"

said Jesus to Nathanael.

Nathanael is an Israelite. As an Israelite, he's a man of circumcision's promise, having been circumcised into the covenant given to Abraham, who would be the father of many nations because from Abraham's lineage would be born the Redeemer for the sinners of every nation.

As an Israelite, Nathanael is a man of the Passover. He would've been brought up in the promise given to the Israelites that the Lord makes them holy by forgiving their sin and that they were a light unto the Gentiles, so that people of all nations would be called into Israel, by Israel's greater Son, the promised Messiah.

As an Israelite, Nathanael is a man of the Torah.

The Torah is the Holy Scriptures. He would've learned Torah from his youth; he would've memorized the accounts of salvation. In Holy Scripture he would've been confronted by the account of Adam and Eve's fall and the Lord bringing to them promise of the Gospel to save them and their lineage from sin; he would've learned the account of the promise of eternal life given to Noah and his family upon their rescue from the flood; Nathanael would've been confronted with the promise given to Jacob in that great wrestling match with God, with the forgiveness Joseph spoke to his brothers in Egypt; he would've be confronted with all the great accounts of salvation history.

As an Israelite, Nathaniel would have listened closely to the teaching of his Rabbi. For the Rabbis taught the Torah, and they taught the Talmud in order to interpret the Torah and make disciples.

The Torah was the Holy Scripture, what you and I would call The Bible. And the Talmud was not Holy Scripture, but was the rabbinic writings that interpreted Scripture and taught the life of the Israelite. In the Talmud, the Israelite was instructed to find a place—a secluded place—to go to at the appointed hour each day to study Torah. For in studying Torah, the Israelite was not just learning a field of knowledge, but was being brought into communion with God and being confronted by the Lord through the accounts and words of Holy Scripture.

One of the places to go to study Torah would be under a fig tree in your yard. The fig tree was the symbol of the Torah, for it was said that the sweet food of the fig was like the sweet sustenance the Israelite was given from the holy words of God. And some Rabbis would teach their disciples when gathering them under the shade of a fig tree.

So when Jesus said to Nathaniel,

“when you were under the fig tree, I saw you”,

Nathaniel, as an Israelite, as a man of the Torah, as a student of the rabbis, could know that this Jesus speaking to him was not only true God, omnipresent and all-knowing, was not only the creator of all things who knows the sinner when the sinner sits down and when he rises up, from whose face no one can flee, but Nathaniel, as a man of the Torah, could know as he stood in front of Jesus that this Man is my Lord.

This is the Lord I read of in the Torah who came and ate dinner at Abraham's tent, who wrestled with Jacob to give the promise of Israel, who gave all Holy Scripture through the prophets, so that when I read Torah, when I sit under my fig tree, this is the Lord with whom I am in communion and who, in those holy words, is coming to me and impacting me with his Gospel, cleansing me of all sin, creating in me a clean heart, and in those words of Scripture is dwelling with me, so that he is looking at my face as surely as I am looking at the pages of Torah.

Jesus said to Nathaniel,

“When you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Nathaniel now has his Rabbi. Standing in front of him is the Word of God in flesh, the Torah in human form; it is Jesus, God the Son, the one with whom Nathaniel was in communion when he was reading Torah and upon whose face Nathaniel is now looking, right in front of his own.

And Nathaniel, an Israelite in whom there is no deceit, now has his king:

“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

You and I go home and we read our Bibles. We know to call it Holy Scripture, for it is the Word of the Holy God.

Probably none of us have a fig tree. I wouldn't even know if it's possible to grow a fig tree in Albuquerque. But we go home and we read our Bibles, perhaps before we go to bed, perhaps in the morning; we read our Bible with our families when we gather for Evening Prayer, we may even go to a Bible study to read our Bibles with other Christians.

What is this, this reading of a book?

For we read other books, too. School books, books of our sports heroes, history books, books of great wars, or even advice books on matters at work or in the family.

But reading the Bible is not like that.

The young man, perhaps, reads his American history book, hoping to comprehend everything in it in order to pass the test. The young woman, perhaps, studies her Algebra book, intent on getting control of all its knowledge so she will breeze through her midterm. We read our books, about history, about math, about politics, about car mechanics, about whatever else, hoping to capture the body of knowledge, striving to understand everything in it, intent to gain control of all the facts and data and instructions, so that nothing is left out of our grasp.

So we learn the Algebra book, and we now have Algebra under our control for whatever problem the teacher puts in front of us. We learn our history, so we can answer all the questions about past names and battles. We learn the rules of our advice book, so we will know what mechanisms to use in any situation.

The Bible can be learned that way, too. We can read it to learn all the names, to memorize all the events, to get control of all the information. We can treat the Bible alongside our Algebra book and our history text.

But the Bible is not a book for us to gain control over.

The Bible is Holy Scripture. That is, it is the words God had inscribed by the prophets and the Apostles so that in these words, in these accounts of the events of salvation, in these texts presenting the Lord in his salvation, God in Heaven in confronting us. It is living Word.

When we are given to read and study Holy Scripture, we are encountering Holy Words to which God has bound himself.

These are not just words for us to read to gain knowledge as if reading a history book, for us to read in order to know more rules and regulations, as if reading a book of education methodologies. Rather, when we are given to read and study Holy Scripture, we are being confronted by the living God who through these words is impacting us as much as if he were standing before us in the flesh as he stood in front of Nathaniel.

When we read the Bible at Evening Prayer with our children, we are bringing into their ears the Living Christ, the King of Israel, coming to them and to us in all that he is. There in those words he is giving us to encounter him in all of his wrath for our sin, and in all of his grace as he cleanses us with his word.

As we read, say, the account of him touching the leper and making him clean, the Holy Spirit is in those words letting us know the leprosy of our sin, and cleansing our consciences with the Gospel.

As we read, say, the account of Moses and the Israelites being bitten by the serpents but then being given the bronze serpent for their deliverance, the Holy Spirit has bound himself to those words, and in those words is rescuing us from the poison of our own guilt and delivering to us the life of Christ Jesus.

As we read of Saul helping to murder young Stephen, we are impacted with our own lack of love for our neighbor, and we are given to rejoice that the same Lord who came to Saul in grace to make him his servant, is in that account of Scripture coming also to us in grace, clothing us in his righteousness and making us his servants, too.

In the Catechism, we learn to say, ***We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.***

We learn it not as if we are learning the history book, trying to memorize all the names, but as the Holy Word of God by which our Lord is coming to us, impacting us with his Law and his Gospel, so that we may encounter him in his grace and be delivered out of our sin and death and into his life and salvation.

We hold it sacred, for it is the Holy Word, the Word our Lord has had inscripturated, so that in these holy words he is coming to us to make us his Israel, he is coming to us as the Word made flesh, as the Torah for every sinner—coming to us to cleanse us and make us holy.

IN THE NAME OF JESUS.