Sermon: 2nd Sunday of Epiphany 2021: 1 Samuel 3.1-10; Revelation 5.1-10; John 1.43-51

Last weekend I had an unexpected phone call. Stephen was someone I helped in my last parish. He had been homeless and we managed to get him settled in London with a job and somewhere to live. Unfortunately, that didn’t last and he was getting in touch to ask for some support. My last parish where Stephen and I had met is in a leafy suburb of Birmingham. Stephen seemed a bit surprised that I had moved to Sheffield. He thought it must have been a big change of context. ‘It’s a bit rough isn’t it?’ he asked.

Many of us have rather skewed perceptions of different parts of the country, or indeed the world. I used to get slightly pitying expressions when I said I lived in Birmingham. The family of a friend of mine sometimes say that something is a bit Barrow in Furness if it’s a bit down at heal. They have never been to Barrow in Furness but once read the name on pencils that are made there.

In Jewish culture, Galilee in general and Nazareth were often looked down on. They were close to areas occupied by Gentiles and the brand of Judaism that Galileans practised was seen as a bit suspect. And like the north in many countries Galilee was seen as remote and parochial.

We get a glimpse of this snobbery in our Gospel today when Philip goes to Nathanael and tells him about Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael is sceptical. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? he asks. We all need to let go of our preconceptions and broaden our minds sometimes. The world is full of surprises.

Thank goodness for Philip in this story. He is not easily put off. Philip is clearly excited by his encounter with Jesus and he knows that Nathanael will benefit from meeting Jesus too. ‘Come and see,’ he says. And what an amazing effect that has on Nathanael’s life. We know that lots of people have preconceptions about Christianity and the church. Some have never crossed the threshold of a church building. Can anything good come out of St John’s Ranmoor? they might ask. Well, we can be Philip to them. We can say, ‘Come and see’. We don’t have to have all the answers. We don’t need to be able to explain everything about the Christian faith. Or even justify all the things that Christians do. We just need to give people that nudge, that invitation, that welcome.

Crossing the threshold of a church can be daunting for some people. St John’s is a very imposing building. There are lots of things that we do that many people would find strange and unfamiliar. For me I guess it would be a bit like going into a bookie’s to place a bet for the first time. I wouldn’t know where to start. But when someone new comes to church we can be a friendly face. Helping them to find their way. To know when to stand and when to sit. And inviting them to coffee afterwards. Remember coffee after church?

The thing that first impresses Nathanael about Jesus is that Jesus saw him under sitting under a fig tree before they even met. In spite of the fact that Nathanael was rude about Nazareth, Jesus welcomes him as an Israelite in whom there is no deceit. Jesus sees Nathanael. He sees deep into his soul. And Nathanael feels really known and understood. And that’s important for all of us. We all want to be known and understood. And that’s as imporatnt now as it ever was. In this third lockdown when many of us are feeling lonely and isolated; we want to know and be known. We aren’t able to gather in church at the moment but we can still be in touch with each other. We might see someone else, not under a fig tree but on zoom at home. Or we might just remember them and think about them for a bit. And perhaps pick up the phone and see how they are. Ask if there’s anything we can do. Or just bring them to God in prayer.

The season of Epiphany is jam packed with stories and themes. And one of those themes is the theme of mission. Of God’s mission to the world. The birth of Jesus as a human being is an expression of God’s mission, of God reaching out to humanity. And throughout his life, Jesus reached out to the world, demonstrating God’s love and healing and forgiveness. And we share in that mission. As members of the body of Christ we share in the miseo dei. There are lots of things that we cannot do at the moment but we can still play our part. I’m really grateful to all those who contributed to the Foodbank and baby Basics on Wednesday and to those who have donated laptops for school children. The mission of God is incredibly broad and all of us can share in it.

In these very challenging times I think our first reading is also important for us. It’s one that is very dear to me and my own sense of calling. The calling of Samuel. Samuel was just a boy. An apprentice in the temple at Shiloh. Not someone with any authority or standing. The human equivalent of Nazareth. We are told that the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread. No one seemed to be hearing much from God. But God spoke to Samuel. And he became God’s mouthpiece. A great prophet. Samuel did not understand this at first. He though Eli was calling him. But eventually, Eli realised what was happening and helped him to listen to God. Sometimes we need to be Eli for other people. Helping them to hear what God is saying to them. And we all need to be like Samuel. Open. Listening. In this strange time when things keep changing and we are not sure what to do, we need to spend time waiting on God and say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.’ Amen.