

## **A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Thank you, Lord, that you know us and can see our potential – for you know who we are created to be. We thank you for all the people you have placed in our lives – parents, teachers, guardians, friends, whoever they may be – people who have made a real difference. We thank you for the blessings of relationships, but most of all for our relationship with you. Help us to bless others in your name. Thank you, Lord, that when we are hurt, confused or unsure about something or someone, we can come to you – thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit’s wisdom and guidance.

Lord, our hearts are lifted by your presence in our lives.

All glory to you with thanks and praise.

**Amen.**

**Read** John 1.43-51

## **Sermon by Revd Peter Lyth**

In the latter days of 1983, the song “Uptown girl” by Billy Joel reached No 1 in the UK charts. It told the story of a “Downtown” i.e. working class man who had fallen for an upper class (uptown) girl. At the time, apparently, he was surrounded by women such as supermodels Elle Macpherson and Christie Brinkley, and singer Whitney Houston. At the time when the song was recorded, Elle was Billy’s girlfriend and Christie appeared in the video of the song and later went on to marry Joel in 1985. One line of the lyrics of the song is, “I bet she's never had a backstreet guy, I bet her momma never told her why” as if to say that the two groups – uptown and downtown never mixed.

It’s often the case that some groups look down on others or dismiss them out of hand. Apparently when the protestors stormed the Capitol in Washington D.C last week, the only thing that caused Donald Trump dismay was that they were “too lower class”. Snobbery is one reason for rejecting others, but it could be down to race, gender, how long they have been there or youth. It’s true that in Christian circles, we may reject a message because it comes from the wrong person and it’s true to say that most prophets were outsiders.

As Philip comes back from his encounter with Jesus, he tells his friend Nathaniel whose initial response is scepticism, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”. It is hard to know just what Nazareth had done to him, but it was probably a local rivalry, or maybe just that it was an obscure place. One of the things that is important is that this is the first time in John’s Gospel that Jesus has met with any resistance and this is the shape of things to come. Jesus will go on to be met with many preconceived notions. Later the Pharisees are so convinced that they know who Jesus is that they do not see what he has done in the healing of a blind man. It is true even now that we can limit our understanding of Jesus with our preconceived ideas.

The story could very easily stop there, but for Philip’s intervention, “Come and see”. To Nathaniel’s credit he does so. He could very easily have remained where he was, rejecting all that he thought he knew of the man from Nazareth. What we find is that Nathaniel’s mind is not as closed as it might have been, As he approaches Jesus, he is greeted with, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false”. This insight, that Nathaniel was a righteous believer, comes as a surprise to him as is Jesus’ follow up statement, “I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you”. It is this understanding of who Nathaniel is that prompts him to reply, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

So he is also one of the first to make the declaration of who Jesus is. In fact his declaration is much more grandiose than that which Philip made and that he had dismissed out of hand.

In John’s Gospel, there is a theme that runs throughout – of accepting or rejecting Jesus. There are a few that refuse to commit either way, such as Nicodemus and Pilate. Here though we have someone who moves from scepticism to affirmation by faith.

Jesus responds by saying something to the effect of “You ain’t seen nothing yet!” before going on with a slightly mystifying statement, “He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.” This might be explained by what would transpire – that Jesus would be the one who goes between earth and heaven.

So what have we to learn from this? As I said before, we often reject the message because it comes from a source that we discredit. Often Jesus would be rejected because of the company that he kept. Here, Nathaniel was quick to reject Jesus because of his town of origin. Yet the lesson is to use discernment to decide whether the message is indeed from God and so should be listened to.

The second thing runs on from this. Jesus declared Nathaniel to be a “true Israelite” – in other words someone who had true faith in God. It did not stop him having curiosity and allowing himself to have his mind changed. Often we can become fixed in our ideas and unwilling to change. For some it is articles of faith such as interpretation of the Bible, for others it is the way in which the church does things in terms of worship for example. The fact that Nathaniel, despite his scepticism took a walk to see for himself meant that he was open to change.

And finally, when Nathaniel saw Jesus and heard what he had to say, his response was unequivocal. He made a great leap of faith and was unafraid to do so. He did not hold back.

Who are the people that today might be bringing us a new revelation of Christ? Is it a “backstreet guy” that we would want to ignore? Are we afraid to “let go” of what we hold to be true for fear that it might take us in a new and risky direction?

Nathaniel met Jesus of Nazareth and his life was changed forever. Ours can be too – if we follow his example.

### **A prayer of confession**

Lord, we come before you to say sorry. Sorry for all the times we’ve let you, ourselves and others down. Sometimes, Lord, we’re so busy talking and doing that we fail to hear you. We miss the still small voice saying, ‘Stop. Listen.’ Lord, we’re sorry for being too busy to hear you. You speak in so many different ways, Lord, one being through other people – but very often we take no notice and continue in our own way. Help us to tune in to your voice.

Lord, as you use others to speak to us, so you use us to draw people to you. But speaking does not always require words. People see our lives, our attitudes and character. Lord, we're sorry for the times we've let you down in these areas – when we pressurise others to conform to our ideas, or fail to listen and give others the space to draw closer to you.

Lord, as we spend these few moments in personal reflection, we ask you to speak to us. Show us anything for which we need to say sorry – and change our ways.

Lord, we lift our confessions to you, in your precious name.

**Amen.**

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