

14 January 2024

1 Samuel 3:1-10
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

*There was Goodin, Goodin, eating all the puddin'
in the store, in the store.*

*There was Goodin, Goodin, eating all the puddin'
in the Quartermaster's store.*

*My eyes are dim, I cannot see,
I have not brought my specs with me;
I have not brought my specs with me.*

When I was a kid at primary school, a bus trip somewhere would almost always include the singing of *The Quartermaster's Store*.¹ Others will perhaps know it from experiences in the military or in the Scouting or Guiding movements. In the version we were taught, we would take it in turns to invent a verse based around a classmate's name. It was very effective in whiling away what could otherwise be a boring journey, and it was huge fun: much inventiveness leading to great hilarity.

But at times it could also be hurtful.

What if no-one ventured a verse about me?

What if they found it hard to find a happy rhyme for my name?

What if they framed the verse around an unkind nickname?

What if they were just playing me for laughs? What if there was malice behind their words?

*There was Stuart, Stuart, he could never do it
in the store, in the store ...*

There are many forms of name-calling. Some of the names or titles we might be given are intended for honour. Some are decidedly not. Jesus faced both; and today's Gospel passage gives us one instance of this which includes both kinds.

¹ Information on the song's origins and use can be found here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Quartermaster%27s_Store

Jesus has been near the Jordan River where he has encountered John the Baptist, and has gone on to meet and call two of John's disciples, Andrew and Simon Peter, who come from Bethsaida in Galilee. Philip, who also comes from Bethsaida, has presumably heard about Jesus from Andrew and Simon. He goes to Nathanael and tells him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

But the names that Philip uses cut no ice with Nathanael: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nazareth, a small community in Galilee, is not a place noteworthy in any way; it is far away from the centre of power, far away from the centre of national and religious life. "Of Nazareth" is hardly any qualification to suggest that Jesus is worth Nathanael's attention, let alone to support the notion that Jesus might be "the one" spoken of by Moses and the Prophets. For Nathanael, the description "of Nazareth" may just as well be a put-down.

There is mystery in the record of the encounter between Jesus and Nathanael: the narrative doesn't tell us why Nathanael finds it so significant that Jesus is able to tell him that he was seen under the fig tree before Philip called him.

But what is clear is that Nathanael's assessment of Jesus "*of Nazareth*" is utterly turned around: Nathanael now declares a whole new set of names – "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."²

Nathanael addresses Jesus as "Rabbi", according Jesus the highest status as a teacher, and positioning himself as a student of Jesus.

Nathanael declares that Jesus is "the Son of God". It is hard to know exactly what Nathanael meant by this declaration. At the least it may amount to an assertion that Jesus is to be identified – as Philip has suggested – as the long hoped-for Messiah. But it may be that Nathanael has revelation beyond that: that Jesus is uniquely and intimately related to God Almighty.

And finally, Nathanael adds the declaration "You are King of Israel". For Nathanael this likely envisages a political and militaristic king: we know however that Jesus was to reveal that his kingship was not of such a worldly character.

² The following summarises Klink's discussion of the titles, pp.151-152. See also Wright, p.19; Beasley-Murray, pp.27, 30.

*My eyes are dim, I cannot see,
I have not brought my specs with me;
I have not brought my specs with me.*

It is as if Nathanael's eyes were dim and unseeing in his early assessment of Jesus "of Nazareth". But Philip invites Nathanael to "come and see". Philip invites Nathanael into an encounter with Jesus, and the possibility of a living ongoing relationship. That encounter opens Nathanael's eyes: he was blind to Jesus; now he sees him for who he truly is.

St John's Gospel is full of the question of who bears witness to Jesus, to who he is and to the events of his life and ministry. And this is a feature of much of the first chapter, beginning with the various testimonial statements of John the Baptist, and continuing with John's disciples. We read of them in the verses that precede today's reading.³ These two disciples of John (soon identified to be brothers, Andrew and Simon Peter) follow Jesus as he passes by. "Rabbi," they say, "where are you staying?". They want to engage with him as a teacher. "Come, and you will see" is Jesus' response. And the result is, again, new revelation, new understanding; personal encounter with Jesus leads to eyes being opened wide after initial dimness of perception.

Nathanael's encounter with Jesus opens his eyes: he was blind to Jesus; now he sees him for who he truly is.

And we find that in this encounter, this opening of the eyes, there is another bout of name-calling going on – but this is entirely positive, and this is about Nathanael.

After Nathanael's initially scathing response, he approaches Jesus and Jesus names *him*: "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Superficially this is just a lovely affirmation of Nathanael as a straightforward person. However, there is also perhaps a deeper naming going on, which becomes clearer when Jesus makes an extraordinary promise to Nathanael: "Very truly I tell you, you

³ John 1:29-34

will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.” Jesus here draws on an ancient story, from Genesis 28, in which Jacob, having tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing belonging to Esau as firstborn, is now on the run from Esau and on his way to his uncle Laban to find himself a wife. Along the way he stops for a night, and has a dream in which sees a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

Jacob was known as “the deceiver” because he had tricked his father in order to steal Esau’s birthright. Later God gave Jacob the name “Israel”, the name that came to be attached to his race of descendants.

So as Jesus references the story of Jacob’s vision, he addresses Nathanael in terms that also recall Jacob: “Here truly is an Israelite (a descendant of Jacob) in whom there is no deceit (unlike Jacob)”. Nathanael is both affirmed in his whakapapa, but he need not be *defined* by this inauspicious aspect of it.

Jesus gives Nathanael a *good* name.

We don’t know if Nathanael needed to particularly hear this “naming” by Jesus. We don’t know whether the affirmation of having no deceit was especially pertinent. But perhaps it was significant: Nathanael’s response, “How do you know me?”, seems a bit sharp if the “no deceit” affirmation carries no particular weight for him. It is not hard to imagine that Nathanael may have been subject to a different kind of name-calling. Perhaps someone had recently questioned Nathanael’s honesty in some business transaction; perhaps there was some misunderstanding that had led to rumours of questionable ethics; perhaps Nathanael could be accused of not being fully frank in some family matter; perhaps people felt Nathanael was putting on a show of righteousness.

*There was Nate, Nate, he was such a fake
at the store, at the store ...*

It doesn’t really matter whether Nathanael could be justly accused of being deceitful or not: Jesus’ affirmation could be transformative in any event. If Nathanael really wasn’t deceitful, then Jesus’ words come as the balm of someone who really “gets” him and stands with him against the accusations. If, on the other hand, Nathanael has moments of being less than straightforward, then Jesus’ affirmation has an

element of quiet challenge which could well call forth a change of heart on the part of Nathanael; Jesus' (perhaps unwarranted) affirmation could in fact be a catalyst to the necessary change of ways.

In the encounter with Jesus, Nathanael is, as it were, re-named.

The encounter with the living Jesus leads to *us* being renamed too.

We are each called by so many "names". Some of them are affirming and good; but many of them are not. Many of our names originate in our childhood and formative years. "Teacher's pet", "Fat", "Slow", "Useless at sport", "Too quiet", "Weak" ... for example. You will, I have no doubt, have your own examples.

We get trapped by the names and labels others put upon us. We get trapped by what we call ourselves, by our self-labelling. We get bound up by the names given us by Satan, the accuser, the Father of Lies. Unwittingly we allow these labels to have power over us. We tell our stories about ourselves, and about others (which amount to names, to labels, to stereotypes) ... and we make no allowance for change, for growth, for transformation.

I am reminded of the book and film *The Help*, about the experience of black maids at the time of the civil rights movement in the early 60s. One particularly poignant aspect of the story is the relationship between maid Aibileen and two-year-old Mae, the emotionally neglected daughter of socialite Elizabeth Leefolt. Aibileen regularly takes the Mae's face into her hands and says to her, quietly but emphatically, "You is kind. You is smart. You is important."

In Jesus we, like Mae, like Nathanael, are given a new identity. And it is the only identity that really matters, the only identity that counts in the long run: *we are beloved children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ.*

We know very little of Nathanael, but it is clear that he did go on to follow Jesus: he is named as being among those who were astonished to witness the risen Jesus

calling to them as they tried fishing and who shared a breakfast of bread and fish with him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.⁴

In eventually witnessing the risen Jesus, Nathanael, along with his fellow disciples – and along with *us* – did indeed see the opening of heaven, angels ascending and descending on Jesus the Son of Man: the risen Jesus is the new way, the new meeting place, between heaven and earth. The invitation remains for us to “come and see” – to grow daily into ever greater understanding and appreciation for who Jesus is, ever greater gratitude and love for him, ever greater service of him. As we do so we find that we are being changed.

And “come and see” is the gentle invitation that we, like the first disciples, are called to make to those we encounter along the way.

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⁴ John 21:1-14