

1 Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20); Revelation 5: 1- 10; John 1:43- end

Sermon preached by Bishop Alan at All Saints Hertford, 17 January 2015

It's a great pleasure to be with you during the season of Epiphany. As the very helpful introduction to the service today explains, the word epiphany means 'revealing' or 'manifesting' or 'making known'. It begins with the arrival of the Wise Men from the East bringing gifts for the Christ child and then the wise men returning home, the first three Christian missionaries, going back to their home countries to speak of the Christ whom they have met.

I note that one of the latest jokes going around the blogosphere at the moment is to ask the question 'What a pity they weren't three wise women!' If they'd been women

1. They would have stopped to ask for directions.
2. They would have been on time.
3. They would have prepared the stable.
4. They would have helped deliver the baby.
5. They would have made a casserole.
6. And they would have brought far more useful gifts for a baby and his mother!

The focus of epiphany is the way that God reveals himself and his purposes. And it is precisely that which is picked up in our three readings which are set for today in the lectionary.

Each reading give us an insight into the ways of God and they are in stark contrast with the terrible spectacle that we have seen over the past few days in Paris and in Belgium when some people have chosen to use violence in the name of God – and what a terrible and frightening thing it has been.

Our first reading is the lovely account of the young lad, Samuel, who is looking after the elderly priest in the temple and in the middle of the night hears someone calling him. He presumes it is Eli and so he gets up and runs to help him only to find that it's not Eli calling. It's only when this happened the third time that Samuel learns to recognize God's voice.

This encounter tells us that God is often calling – the problem is that we have not attuned our ears to recognize his voice. Now we know in everyday life we are surrounded by so much noise that we can't pick anything out. Some years ago I remember being woken most mornings in the summer by the dawn chorus. Lots of different birds making a racket in the trees which surrounded my house. One summer, I came to recognize the song of one particular bird which tended to perch on the tree on the corner. The bird became a sort of friend who I could recognize amidst all the other bird song. Of course, he may well have been there for a long time, always calling the same song, but I had to learn to attune my ear to hear him.

Then there is the rather strange passage from the Book of Revelation. The scroll which no one can open contains what is going to happen at the end times. St John weeps bitterly because he cannot open it – but then we are told that the Lamb (Jesus) is able to open the scroll. It's a rather roundabout way of saying that the future is in God's hands. We do not need to know the details – we are to trust in the one who will reveal it at the right time.

And then our gospel reading from the end of John chapter 1. What is so interesting that unlike many other religious leaders who *commanded* people to follow them, we find that Jesus is the one who *invites*. The passage begins: *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'* This isn't an isolated incident. It was repeated whenever he calls people to follow him. Jesus inviting us on a journey. He never coerces, he always beckons.

Now it is that – God's gracious invitation – which gives us some helpful clues about our diocesan vision of *Living God's Love*, which begins with *going deeper into God*. The Christian life isn't a static state, so that once you've been confirmed you've arrived. No, the Christian is on a life-long pilgrimage,

walking each day with the Christ who leads us. Every day is a day of new discoveries and new insights.

Nathaniel discovers just this. Far from him simply coming to understand something new about God, he finds that he encounters the One who knows him better than he knows himself: *When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'*

One of the reasons why some people don't want to go deeper into God is because when God reveals more of himself, we inevitably discover more about ourselves. His love is like a mirror, by which his burning love shines into every corner of our lives. That is not always that comfortable and it doesn't necessarily make life easier.

I am always slightly amused when non-believers tells me I need religion as a crutch to help me get through life. My experience is that far from taking me away from the cut and thrust of life, my faith has made life much more complicated. It's led me to live in different parts of our country; it's brought me face to face with people of other faiths; it's taken me to some of the far corners of the world; it's confronted me with trying to do something positive about some of the world's most intractable problems. I have to grapple on a daily basis with being part of a worldwide family that has been entrusted with ancient wisdom and truth and I have to think what it has to say to today's world.

It would be far easier to be able to go along with some of the hastily formed consensuses that form so much of our public life and retreat into being a couch potato in front of the TV, living vicariously through the lives of the Big Brother cast.

But when we encounter Christ, we meet the one who knows us better than we know ourselves and summons us to something newer, something better.

But what is so interesting about this encounter, with its invitation to go deeper into God, is that it doesn't leave it there. We read: *Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote...' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'*

It's the simply invitation. Philip has glimpsed something of God in this rabbi from Nazareth and he wants to share it. It's not that Philip fully understands what is going on, or the full meaning of it.

So Philip is one of the first people in the gospel to 'make new disciples'. Note, he doesn't have all the answers, he doesn't have a degree in theology, but he has met Jesus. As today we 'make new disciples' the most important and the most basic simple lesson is to have the courage to say to others 'Why don't you come and see?', 'Why don't you come to church?', 'Why don't you join our enquirer's group?' or 'Why do you come along to one of our gatherings?' Like Philip we don't have to know all the answers. As one commentator once said: 'Making disciples is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread'.

And now Philip, along with Nathanael, Peter, James and John and the other disciples are caught up in a new movement. They learn from Jesus about caring for the poor, the outcast, the sick and the lonely. Indeed, when the Holy Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost, they are formed into a new community where they share their lives and express the love of God in practical action. In the words of our diocesan vision, they 'transform communities'.

One of the privileges of being a bishop is I get to glimpse some of some of the very different ways in which churches in the diocese are making a difference - credit unions, the food banks, the shelters for the homeless, the youth projects, the clubs for the elderly, the parent and toddler clubs, the Street Pastors.

You also see it in the amazing generosity of Christians the length and breadth of the diocese.

All Saints Alive

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Did you know that last year, the combined charitable giving of our churches (that's not what we spent on ourselves or on the parish share, but the amount we gave away to good causes) was over £2.2m?

So let's pray that we may be an Epiphany people – as we go deeper into God, as we transform our communities and as we make new disciples.