

John 1.43-end; 1 Samuel 3.1-10; Revelation 5.1-10
10:30am All-Age Zoom from St. Andrew's Vicarage
2nd Sunday of Epiphany: 16th January 2021.

'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' ... 'Come and See' (v. 1.46)

In last week's eNews about today, you were invited to think of a place, a town, a locality, even a dark corner of your suburb, which has a bad reputation, or was the site of a sad or bad happening for you. If you've experienced something like this, it's often tempting to think about such a place as having a permanently bad reputation, a bad 'karma', and we may even go out of our way to stay away from there forever.

Fair enough, you may say, 'once bitten twice shy' as the saying goes. On the other hand, you could think to yourself, 'lightning never strikes twice' - and think that this couldn't possibly happen again. Either way, the truth is probably somewhere in between.

There's always a temptation to jump on the bandwagon of making assumptions, of rumour, fear, gossip, mockery, of joining in with the lowest common denominators of opinion, even when they seem to come from somewhere you might think reliable, like your regular Sunday newspaper.

Unfortunately, and especially in these divided and polarized times, there are too many examples like this. Whether we're talking about Muslims and Jews, Remainers and Brexiteers, travellers and immigrants, they're all lumped together and blamed for this, that, or the other. We all do it, grown-ups and children - in the playground, at the office, or in the checkout queue - but we shouldn't, because it's being careless and lazy.

This is what Nathanael is doing when he asks, '[Can anything good come out of Nazareth?](#)' Of course, today we know that Jesus came from Nazareth, but in those days, perhaps he thought he was being funny? His question seems to imply that people from Nazareth don't have a good reputation. We don't know the specifics - was it because, at that time, they were regarded as poor, or stupid, or untrustworthy? Within my lifetime, unkind jokes were often made like this about people from Ireland.

What happens is that people, the media, folk just like you and I, make unfair judgements. We're not seeing things as they really are - we are preferring not to see the truth, for a cheap laugh, for a facile joke, to make our friends laugh, or because we want to inflict our prejudice on someone else - it's so easy to do so, especially with those who are easily led.

Philip could have taken a confrontational approach and said to Nathanael, 'Well, I don't think that's very fair! In my experience, people from Nazareth are good people.' What he did say was, '[Come and see.](#)' Good old Phillip - this is the kind of response Jesus might have offered - wanting to teach by showing rather than by telling. Jesus taught with stories.

There's a story illustrating this in the children's book, *A Little Princess*, by Francis Hodgson Burnett (1905). A fellow pupil, Lavinia, is being horrid to the young Sara and criticizing her for making up fairy stories about heaven. Sara, the 'Little Princess', replies by saying "There are much more splendid stories in Revelation..., ...just look and see! How do you

know mine are fairy stories? But I can tell you, you will never find out whether they are or not if you're not kinder to people than you are now".

Our readings for today, include a passage from Revelation. 'Revelation' means 'Epiphany'. All today's readings are about 'Vision', about seeing things in all their variety and complexity, not just by their surface appearances. Sara is asking Lavinia to see things more deeply and to be kinder.

We should be always trying to see more deeply, because then we may begin to see with the eyes of a 'visionary', even one like John of Patmos who wrote the book of Revelation. We can often struggle to make sense of his visions involving strange creatures like a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, or be surprised at how incense, used to signify prayer, becomes itself the prayers of the saints.

Our analytical minds long to tidy up every discrepancy or reject anything we don't understand. We're seldom content to allow challenging ideas to remain – to allow the tension between factual approaches to scripture and imaginative ones, or between solving the problem and living with it.

The Gospel reading for this 2nd Sunday of Epiphany (John 1:43-51) takes us to one of the most mysterious and beautiful moments in the NT. As the disciples begin to gather around Jesus, Philip finds Nathanael making that sarcastic response, '[Can anything good come out of Nazareth?](#)' Nathanael is having a 'Lavinia' moment. Phillip's '[Come and see](#)' reinforces the theme of 'seeing' and vision.

And Nathanael suddenly 'sees' that he is completely known by this man he has never met. Something *amazing* happens here, Nathan of God, from scoffing at Nazareth one minute before, has a sudden leap of understanding, outpacing reason or teaching, leaping ahead of all the other disciples, to an understanding and certainty that even Peter would not attain for another three years. He declares, '[Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!](#)'

This is an Epiphany - something whole and complete has been disclosed in a single glance. To see and be seen is enough! - an example in the Gospel of a sudden 'awakening', a direct pointing to reality.

And then Jesus, alluding subtly to Nathanael's mention of Israel, promises that this is just the beginning of a greater epiphany. Nathanael is an Israelite indeed and Jesus points to the key epiphany in the life of Israel, when he was still called Jacob, the epiphany in which he saw the ladder connecting heaven and earth: '[Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man](#)' (*John 1.51, see Genesis 28:12*).

Spoken in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.