

## **An Address by Jonathan Draper for 17 January 2021, Epiphany 2: Choice**

I'd like to begin this morning with a reminder of the beginning of our first reading from the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians:

*'All things are lawful for me,'*

*But not all things are beneficial.*

*'All things are lawful for me,'*

*But I will not be dominated by anything.*

These are pretty apposite words in a time of pandemic and government rules and regulations. It's also how you work things out when principles clash. Of course you are free to behave as you like: you are British and have inalienable rights. On the other hand, especially in a time of pandemic, not all things are beneficial – to you and certainly not to other people. A question for us is: how do we avoid being dominated by anything, even our freedom, and so serve the world that God loves? Be free by all means, but don't let your freedom be a stumbling block – or a death sentence – for others. Adults negotiate the limits of their freedom for the sake of others, for no freedom is absolute.

Freedom is often partnered with choice: I am truly free when I can make choices between courses of action. And choosing can be a moral measure: what you choose – whether it is what to wear, what to eat, how to take a holiday, how to vote, or whatever – has consequences. Just doing what you please and paying no attention to the consequences is a sign of moral inadequacy, not a sign of moral strength. No choice is morally neutral. All choices have consequences, as those who invaded the Capitol Building in Washington – or incited them to do so – are discovering.

The Gospel reading for today centres on choice. Jesus had been in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, where he had been baptised by John the Baptist and his public ministry had begun. 'The next day', according to John's Gospel, Jesus decided to go to Galilee, a journey of about 70 miles which I guess might have taken as much as a week. When he got there he found Philip and said to him 'follow me'. This is the fundamental choice presented to all people who encounter Jesus: to follow or not to follow. Each person who calls her- or himself a Christian has made that choice and chosen to accept the consequences of that choice. Because none of us can know the consequences of that first choice in full when we make it, some people fall away and choose not to follow any more when the consequences become clearer or difficult.

But it is a real choice: Philip might have said ‘no’ and not gone to find his friend Nathanael, and then we would have been deprived of one of the great sceptical comments in the Bible or any other book. When Nathanael heard that Philip was all excited about Jesus from Nazareth, Nathanael’s natural scepticism surfaces and he asks: ‘can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ It’s often made me wonder what the reputation of Nazareth was in those days that made him react like that. I was about to say that it’s a bit like saying ‘Can anything good come out of ...’, but then I thought I could possibly offend almost anyone listening by adding in any place at all, so decided – made the choice – not to. I assume no moral high ground by that, only self-preservation.

But Philip chooses to follow, and Nathanael, however reluctantly, chooses to go along to meet Jesus. Philip has not tried to convince Nathanael to follow too, and perhaps that is something that modern day followers can learn from too. It is not our job to convince people that following Jesus is the right thing to do for them. Our job, like Philip’s, is simply to say ‘come and see’; come and see for yourself, come and see what has made me choose the way I have; come and see the difference following Jesus has made to me and my community. We have to allow God and God’s Spirit to do their work and not try to do it ourselves. Nathanael encountered Jesus and then made his choice.

Jesus had seen Nathanael sitting under a fig tree. Perhaps he was close enough to Philip and Nathanael to hear their conversation, for when Nathanael comes to meet him Jesus says, with what I always imagine was a smile on his face, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit’. Nathanael was, I guess, someone who spoke his mind, who was not going to be simply talked into anything but would make up his own mind. Jesus acknowledges Nathanael’s integrity and does not push back at him. His encounter with Jesus led him to make his choice: he chose to follow.

On the whole NT scholars, on very little evidence, believe that Nathanael is also sometimes called Bartholomew: he’s generally named with Philip in the various lists of the apostles, and where he isn’t, Bartholomew is. Like most of the apostles, Nathanael is said to have suffered a martyr’s death, and I guess this was a consequence that none of them foresaw when they chose to follow.

Up to this point, this is a reading out which I can make some sense. But then we come to the bit where Nathanael says to Jesus, ‘Where did you come to know me?’. Jesus replies, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you’. At this point Nathanael goes into a positive rapture: ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’. There is quite a jump between saying I saw you under the fig tree to you are the Son of God, and I don’t really get it. If this was a miracle instead of Jesus

overhearing the conversation between Philip and Nathanael, then it is, as the great Methodist biblical scholar CK Barrett put it, a pretty trivial miracle, and hardly worthy of mention, let alone deciding that the miracle worker is the Son of God. If it is a case of Jesus overhearing their conversation, then it's an inexplicable over-reaction by Nathanael. This has led many scholars to think that this is not really a story about something that happened, but a series of symbols making a bridge between the old dispensation and the new, between being an Israelite who follows God with integrity and one who sees in Jesus a new way of being a faithful follower of God. If the fig tree is a symbol of plenty, then, my dear Gift of God (which is what Nathanael means), you ain't seen nothin' yet. You will be like Jacob and see angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth.

Whatever the reality of the story, there seems to be two main things the writer of John's Gospel is trying to convey: one is about Jesus, and the other is about us. John's Gospel wants us to see that Jesus is the messiah – the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, the one that Nathanael sees as Son of God and King of Israel, the one who promises greater things to come. And much of the rest of the Gospel is about just that.

But John's Gospel is also always putting before us a choice: come and see, follow me. And the choice to follow is not made because you have believed enough things, or even believed them in the right way; the choice is not made because you are a good person or the right fit or privileged in some way. The choice can only be made, can only be real, can only have meaning when you come at it, like Nathanael, with integrity, with an open mind, and through an encounter with Jesus, however that comes. If the choice is real, it will have consequences. You will see the world differently, you will no longer, as St Paul puts it, be dominated by anything, you will act in ways that are beneficial; you will choose differently. Perhaps that's why I've always been uncomfortable with the questions at baptism which are all about what you believe. I think they should be about what you will do when principles clash, when the love that stands at the heart of the Christian faith comes into conflict with indifference or hate. What will you do, how will you choose? The questions aren't easy, and they will tax our best intentions all through our lives. But that's the choice and its consequences: seeing the world differently, seeing love and justice and peace and mercy at the heart of things. But in making it, perhaps we will, like Nathanael, see heaven opened and the glory of God here on earth.