

## 2024 TALK, 28.1.24, ISAIAH 40:1-11, JOHN 1:35-51

### THE TENDER, GENTLE KINDNESS OF GOD – AND ‘GREATER THINGS’ ?

The other week I re-visited Beechen Grove BC in Watford. Long time since I was last there. Dunno if anyone has ever been to BGBC ? Worth a visit, if you can find a parking spot... But I left feeling glad for two reasons: glad I'm not at a church like that, with such a huge premises, in such a difficult spot. More importantly, while I was there, enjoying worship with my fellow Baptist ministers, God gave me a word. Yes, just one word. A particular word which first came to me when Chris was going through her radiotherapy treatment at Mount Vernon Hospital, just before Covid. It was a word which meant a lot to me at that time. And the other week, God reminded me. That word was: 'held'. In all that we go through, we are being held by God.

For all the drama of Isaiah 40, of an important message being proclaimed to all people. A loud & dramatic vision of mountains being levelled and a highway for God being made through the wilderness. For all that, we are left with this wonderful picture. Of the promised Messiah coming with power, but coming like a shepherd. Here is Isaiah's fore-telling of our Saviour, the Good Shepherd. Jesus, who holds the little lambs close to his heart. This is the kind of holding we all need isn't it? Not the vice-like grip of a mighty & steely God, but the gentle & intimate embrace of a God who is both our Father & our friend.

At the end of the first chapter of John's gospel, before he has even begun his public ministry, we have this simple exchange. Jesus first words to Philip & Andrew, as they decide to follow him, rather than John the Baptist, are a very direct & pointed question: 'What do you want ?'. And they don't really know what it is exactly they want. So, instead they just ask Jesus where he is staying. Indirectly they are saying: 'We want to spend time with you'.

So, we must ask **ourselves** 2 questions. Helpful questions, as we prepare to journey through the season of Lent. First: how much time are we spending with Jesus? We are all so busy aren't we ? For all sorts of perfectly good reasons. And yet, what is best, what is most needed, what is of first importance, so often gets elbowed out. We all struggle to find time & space for God.

One of the reasons we may struggle with this, is because, like Philip & Andrew, we are not always clear what we want of Jesus. Yes, we have all sorts of prayer

requests to bring. Plenty of these. But once we have brought all these, we may find that Jesus is still looking at us, still waiting for something more from us. So our 2<sup>nd</sup> question is simply this: 'What do we want - of Jesus ?' What is it that **you** want of God? And I think both our passages today give us our answer. We want a God who is both all-powerful, but also kind & gentle & tender - to all. It's a miraculous & paradoxical combination. Something which is uniquely true of our God, of our Saviour Jesus. Meekness & majesty.

Jesus' next words to Andrew & Philip are these: 'Come & you will see'. Like them, we don't really know where we are going. We don't really know what we want. But like them, we **can** respond to the kind invitation of Jesus. Something in us rises to this intriguing promise of Jesus, 'Come & **you will see**'. The other wonderful part of this story is that both Andrew & Philip are able to echo the invitation of Jesus. Andrew invites his brother, Simon. This is the first thing he does, after he spent time with Jesus. And then, having been told by Jesus, 'Follow me', Philip invites his friend, Nathaniel, with these words: 'Come & see'. They both believed they had found something extra-special. Good news they wanted to share ! They believed they had stumbled upon the Messiah, the Promised One of God. Someone worth taking a lot at. Someone worth spending time with.

One of the most obvious things to emerge from our quick congregational survey last month, about the priorities for Carey this year was this: we want Carey to reach out into our community in different ways. So that we will see people coming to faith in Jesus. And how is this likely to happen? Simply this. By us doing what Andrew & Philip did. They invited those they knew. They invited people closest to them: 'Come & see'. And their little group suddenly doubled in size.

I wonder how we would react if our church doubled in size overnight ? We would no longer be able to have Sunday worship in the hall, would we? Or we might decide to have two times of worship together, instead... It would be a challenge for us all. Jesus brings growth. Jesus brings change. And both change & growth are a challenge to us, as it was to Nathaniel.

Nathaniel started by protesting: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'. Not long after, having spoken with Jesus; having felt he was seen & completely understood by Jesus, Nathaniel then equally loudly declares: 'Rabbi, you are

the Son of God, you are the King of Israel'. This is a confession which pre-dates the ministry of Jesus. And it comes some time before Simon Peter makes *his* good confession about Jesus. Quite a turn-around. This truthful Israelite, Nathaniel, suddenly has his mind & heart opened to the presence of God.

Which raises another question: Who is Nathaniel ? . Who is this guy ? We know he was from Cana, in Galilee. Otherwise, we know so very little. These here are the only words that are recorded in the gospels or the book of Acts from Nathaniel. He is there at the very beginning. He is the first to make the 'good confession' that Jesus is the Son of God. He is there at the end, when the risen LORD Jesus appears to a small group of disciples by the Sea of Galilee. So, why don't we see & hear more of Nathaniel ? It is, after all, to Nathaniel that Jesus promises personally: 'You will see heaven open... You will see greater things'...

I guess one answer to the question is simply this: Not all of us are Peters or Pauls. Are we? In fact, most of us aren't. Many of us don't get to have our stories recorded. And yet, Jesus sees us & know us. This is the good news. That, like Philip & Nathaniel, we have all been given a personal invitation. 'Come & see'... 'Follow me'.

This is our personal good news, which we can also share with those we know.

- We follow a saving God, who sees us & knows us & loves us perfectly, despite our imperfections.
- We follow a God who is Almighty and holds all things.
- We follow a God who promises that we will see heaven open & that we will see 'greater things'.

Nathaniel's complete story is unwritten, but it is held & remembered in the mind of God. Meanwhile, our unwritten stories are not yet complete. God is still writing our stories. We might not know exactly where we are going or what we want. But, with Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we can write an amazing story together, as we journey on into 2024.

Jesus' promise to Nathaniel (and to us in 2024) is, that if we continue to follow Jesus: 'we will see heaven open; we will see greater things'. I believe that, despite all that is going on in our world right now, that our churches, that our world will see revival this year. Something I encourage you pray about this Lent. But let's not get too carried away by this hope of revival, this expectation of

'greater things'. Because at the end of the day, we are brought back to this insight from Nathaniel. What 'greater thing' is there than this: to see & to know that God cares deeply & intimately for each of us & all creation? Alleluia !  
Thanks be to God !