**John 1:43-51**

**The call to be a follower of Jesus**

This morning, we continue our short series of sermons thinking about who Jesus Christ and what it means to be a follower of Christ. First, we thought about the humanity of Christ and his childhood. Last week, we thought about how Jesus loves us and doesn’t judge us, despite our contradictions. Today, we are looking at this passage from John 1 and thinking about what it means to follow Jesus. I suppose, in a sense, every sermon is about what it means to follow Jesus - but there are four aspects I want to draw on this morning out of the dialogue and interactions in this story that John records for us.

And the scene is set for us as Jesus decides to head for Galilee, and that’s when the encounter with Philip begins. The first point we notice is actually very easy to miss…

Right at the start of the story, John says: “Jesus found Philip”.

If you go to any book shop and look in the spirituality section, you will find autobiographies of people who have devoted themselves to the spiritual life through the years. And very often, they write about how they spent many years seeking out a spiritual leader to follow. They may have tried out the ideas of gurus, or philosophers, they may have sat at the feet of great preachers and wise teachers trying to decide who to follow. But that is not the same for us as Christians: that is not even an option because, as John says, “Jesus found Philip”.

Philip didn’t find Christ. Christ found Philip.

The truth at the heart of the Christian story is not that you and I have found Christ, but Christ has found us.

We did not decide for God. God decided for us.

And the narrative that runs throughout the Bible is of a God who constantly seeks out his people.

And that’s the case right from the beginning of Scripture. If you remember in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, realised they were naked and were embarrassed, so they hid. And, in verse 8, God is walking in the garden and looking for Adam and Eve and in verse 9: “But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’” Right from the beginning of time, God has been seeking us out and finding us.

So let us never think that we chose God: he has chosen us! As Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:4: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world…”

And this is important because the knowledge that God has sought us out, rather than *vice versa*, is crucial in keeping us humble before God. Even our own faith is not our own decision!

And once Jesus finds Philip, he issues a single command: “Follow me”. Put Jesus as number one in our lives: that is what is demanded of us as Christians. Philip is compelled to follow Jesus – and leaves all else behind: his work, his family, his possessions, his ambitions. It all has to go when we follow Christ.

I once heard a great youth worker teaching us about discipleship, and he said this: If a young person says, “Can I be a Christian and still have a boyfriend?”, the answer is No. “Can I be a Christian and still enjoy a drink?”, the answer is No. “Can I still be a Christian and gel my hair?”, the answer is No. “Can I be a Christian and still go clubbing?”, the answer is No. Not because there is anything inherently wrong with boyfriends or alcohol or gelling your hair or clubbing: there isn’t anything wrong with these…but there is something inherently wrong with a question that’s phrased: “Can I be a Christian and still dot dot dot?” A question that is phrased like that suggests that the enquirer wants to follow Jesus but still keep something back, some part of their life, for themselves - and that is the problem.

Jesus, when he calls us to follow him, does not give us any Get-Out clauses. As someone once said, “He is Lord of all, or not at all”.

Following Jesus is a radical commitment that demands every aspect of our being. Of course we get it wrong from time to time and fall short of the ideal - but the intention of radical discipleship should always be before us.

Second, we notice what Philip did when he set out to follow Jesus

Did he go on an Alpha Course? No.

Did he join a church? No.

Did he get baptised? No.

The first thing he did, according to John, was find his brother Nathanael and tell him about Jesus!

The first rule of being a disciple of Jesus is very simple: Tell other people about Jesus!

And what is so lovely, I think, is that Philip didn’t have any great learning and yet he was really effective in being an evangelist for Jesus. I’ve just said how God finds us, not the other way round, but look what Philip says to Nathanael: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law wrote…” Well, Philip’s theology isn’t very good: Jesus found him, he didn’t find Jesus! But, nevertheless, he is effective in bringing Nathanael to Jesus.

So often, we think we can’t tell other people about Jesus because we don’t know enough or we don’t know our Bibles well enough…but none of that matters. We don’t need to be theologians to be effective. We just need to be passionate for Jesus, and he will do the rest!

So firstly, to be a follower of Jesus means to be found by him.

Secondly, to be a follower of Jesus means to tell others about him.

Thirdly, to be a follower of Jesus means keeping on going despite the knocks. Nathanael’s response to Philip is not particularly encouraging, is it? “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip had come running over to Nathanael, passionate about sharing this good news about Jesus, only to be met with a really cynical response.

Sometimes, when we tell people about Jesus, we are met with cynicism or rudeness or apathy and it can be really discouraging and it can knock our self-confidence. But when it happened to Philip, he didn’t get into some theological debate about the merits of Nazareth as a geographical region or its place within the salvation history of Israel, or anything like that…He just said to Nathanael, “Come and see!”

And, when it comes to evangelism, that’s all we need to keep saying: “Come and see!” We don’t need to get involved in heavy theological debates. “Don’t take my word for it. Come and see!” - and let God do the rest.

Now, there is a real challenge to us here as a church, because there is a rhetorical question for us to answer: if people do “Come and see”, what will they find? Will people receive a warm welcome here? Will they get a sense of God changing lives? Will they have an experience of worship that gives them access to God? Will they go away with a sense of excitement that something is happening here? Is Jesus at the centre of St. Andrew’s? If they come and see, will they meet with God? All good questions for us to ponder as our Mission Action Plan unfolds…

Being a disciple means being found by God.

Being a disciple means telling others about him.

Being a disciple means not losing confidence when the message is not always welcomed.

Fourthly and finally: Being a disciple means receiving peace and blessing from God.

Jesus’ response to Nathanael is very interesting indeed. Let’s look at this part of the passage: “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.’” Now, there’s two things to be said here:

First, is to do with the word ‘see’ – and the different Greek words in the Bible for this. Philip had said to Nathanael, “Come and see!” And the Greek word he used for ‘see’ had to do with use of the eyes: we look and we see something. But twice the word ‘see’ is used with regard to Jesus in this passage: “Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him…” and “I saw you under the fig tree…” And on both those occasions, there is a different Greek word for ‘to see’ used than the one Philip used. On both occasions, the word used has nothing to do with physical sight through the eyes but speaks of spiritual perception instead. Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him; that is to say, he saw into Nathanael’s heart as he approached and recognised him for who he truly was. And secondly, we read Jesus’ words that, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you”, which suggests that Jesus knew of Nathanael before this encounter - not in a physical sense of having seen him before - but in a more spiritual sense of having had his hand on Nathanael’s life before that encounter from all eternity. Yes, Jesus Christ had found Nathanael, just as he had found Philip, even though both Philip and Nathanael thought they had found Jesus. And there is a real sense of peace that we can derive from the knowledge that God has had his hand on us even from before we became aware of him

But secondly, it is interesting that Jesus says: “I saw you under the fig tree”. That is a phrase that is used three other times in the Bible: 1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10. For example from 1 Kings – “During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel…lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig-tree”. And each time that phrase is used, sitting under the fig-tree is a symbol of living in the peace and blessing, which an obedient relationship with God provides.

And so, in this passage from John, Jesus is perceiving in Nathanael the obedience of a well lived Jewish life. He says, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” meaning that Nathanael has known the peace and blessing of God on his life. But, in a relationship with Jesus, there is even more for Nathanael to receive: far more than obedience to the Jewish law could ever give him. Jesus says to him: “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” I think Jesus is commending him for having been an obedient Jew - but he is calling Nathanael into a deeper place of peace and blessing through a relationship with him.

And, as Christians, we know that peace and blessing can only derive from our relationship with Jesus. The more we allow Jesus to be the centre of our lives, the more we know peace in our hearts.

So this is a seemingly very simple passage, a lovely story about the calling of Philip and Nathanael - but it is full to the brim with deep teaching on the nature of discipleship.

We did not choose God – he chose us from all eternity.

We are called by him primarily to tell others about the good news of Jesus.

We are not to be discouraged by the response we may get from others but trust that an encounter with God will be life-changing for them too.

We are called into a life of peace and blessing with God: Jesus sees us, he knows everything about us and perceives our deepest needs. And if we follow him, as he says to Nathanael, “[we] will see heaven opened…”

Jesus Christ is, indeed, a Saviour to be followed - and it is a lifetime’s work for us to live out these two simple instructions: “Follow me!” and “Come and see!”

Today, we follow.

Today, we come – and we will see.