

Sunday 18th January 2015 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		2nd Sunday after the Epiphany 2nd Sunday of the Year B
1 Sam 3:1-10	Ps 139:1-6,13-18	1 Corinthians 6:12-20
		John 1:43-51
INVITATION TO LIFE – COME AND SEE		

“ ‘Nazareth!’ Nathanael exclaimed. ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’ Philip said, ‘Come and see.’ ” (Jn 1:46)

We gather together once again in these first few weeks of the new year. It is good to be back from holiday, to see friends and familiar faces again. Christmas is something of a distant memory – though not too distant to still enjoy some of the Christmas cracker jokes, e.g. “A huge pothole, 6 metres deep, has appeared in High Street. Police are looking into it.”

This is a time of new beginnings. Schools are re-opening; students are returning to town; some of us may be starting a new job, or picking up the load once again after the holidays. For many, it’s a time when we ask ourselves questions about significance and direction. What direction is my life going? Where am I heading? Does my life, does my work, have any significance, value, meaning? Does our faith, does God, have anything to say to me, to us, at the start of the new year?

Significance, meaning, direction, value of life, the place of faith – questions we ask, and especially now as we reflect on the terrible events in the last few weeks: the terror attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris, France, and the deaths of seventeen victims and three attackers; the Boko Haram attacks in northern Nigeria early in January, with hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians being killed – attacks described as “a crime against humanity”¹; the use of young girls, some as young as ten, as suicide bombers; the almost daily reports of ISIS brutality.

¹ Said by John Kerry, US Secretary of State.

Our hearts go out to all who have suffered this extreme violence; to their families and friends; to communities and countries trying to cope with this level of destruction and hatred.

Speak Lord...

Hatred and suspicion and fear dominate the headlines. You and I ask our own questions about the significance and the meaning of what we are doing, the direction we are heading, and the place of faith in uncertain times. Let us hear the voice of God speaking to us through our scripture readings this morning.

In our Old Testament reading, we heard the call of God to the boy Samuel (1 Sam 3:1-10). At first Samuel does not know what is happening, and runs to Eli. Eli sends him back to bed. Again God calls Samuel, and Samuel runs to Eli. When it happens the third time, Eli, old and fading as he is, finally realises that God is speaking to Samuel, and is able to help him to respond, And so as God calls once again, Samuel answers, “Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.”

Samuel’s response was the beginning of a life-time of faithful ministry and witness. How much we need people like Eli amongst us today: Eli the older man, with a life-time of experience, who could nevertheless recognise that something new was happening, and could help the young Samuel to respond. He pointed Samuel to God. And we need people like Samuel, young people who hear and respond to God’s voice and call. I think especially of our teenagers, our matrics, our students, our young adults – such a crucial and exciting time of life, when you make choices, when the world is at your feet. The most important choice you can make is to say, “Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.”

But who is this God, this Lord, that is speaking? What are we letting ourselves in for if we respond? How do we discern the voice of God in the midst of all the other voices? Whose voice is speaking when suicide bombers claim to be following God, or when presidents say

that God told them to invade Iraq, or when leaders claim God's anointing for their abuse of power?

This question is particularly important, given the recent terrible events in Paris, Nigeria, and elsewhere. What voice are people hearing?

For some, to talk of faith in God is absurd. Some view all religion, and the god or gods that it represents, as utterly negative, brutal, controlling, violent, cruel.

For others, especially in our secular Western world of today, religion is something to be kept completely separate from public life. If you want to believe in something, they say, that's fine – but keep your faith and your beliefs to yourself. And many in our secular world are quick to write off all religion as “inherently violent”, or condemn religion as “the cause of all the major wars in history”. People point to the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Wars of Religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as examples of this. They also point to the recent spate of terrorism committed in the name of religion to prove that Islam is particularly aggressive.

The recent attacks carried out by fighters who identify themselves as Islamist has put the role of faith and religion firmly in the public arena. It can no longer be said that faith is a private matter or that religion has no part to play in public life. What we or others believe, how we behave, what values we hold, have implications for the wider community. And freedom of speech, so valued by many after years of repression and silence, has legal limits in a number of countries, including our own: it cannot be used for hate speech, or to promote racism, or to slander others.

These terrible events are not a reason to reject all forms of faith or religion, or to write off certain religious beliefs as evil or misguided, nor is it a reason to condemn Islam as a religion of violence. Mainline Islamist leaders have condemned the terror attacks in France, and the Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria, while calling for greater respect for religion in public debate and in the media. Pope Francis has

acknowledged the limits to freedom of speech – “if [this person] insults my mother, he can expect a punch... You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others.”

And, as Karen Armstrong points out, the two world wars were not fought on account of religion; people go to war for many factors, in particular competition for scarce resources; and people commit terror atrocities for a complex range of reasons.² It is simplistic and incorrect to blame religion as the source of all evil. Violence and competition for resources has been part of society from early history. The role of religion over the centuries has been to curb violence and to build “respectful, life-enhancing communities”. It has not always been possible to radically change their societies; instead, religious people of all faiths have attempted to find kinder ways for people to live together.³

Come and see

Who, then, is this God who speaks to Samuel, and to us?

We are given a picture of God in Psalm 139, which affirms the value of each one of us in the eyes of God: “you have created my inward parts, knit me together in my mother’s womb... you knew my soul... your eyes saw my limbs when they were yet imperfect...” and in 1 Cor 6, with its call to purity; our sexuality, our bodies, are part of our spiritual life: “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, so honour God with your body.”

God is given a human face and voice in our Gospel reading, as we encounter the person of Jesus Christ, as Jesus calls Philip to follow him; and as Philip invites Nathaniel to “come and see”.

The call of Philip and Nathaniel by Jesus to follow him, the invitation to come and see, is the call to be disciples, it is an invitation to follow, to learn; it is the invitation into a relationship. It is an invitation that

² Armstrong, K. 2014. *Fields of Blood. Religion and the History of Violence*. 1f.

³ Armstrong, 13

Jesus extends to all who seek and long for meaning, for significance, for value in what we do; it is God's call to all who are looking for a path of faith and life. "Follow me." "Come and see."

Philip and Nathaniel describe Jesus as "the man of whom Moses wrote in the law, the man foretold by the prophets: it is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth" (Jn 1:45), "the Son of God [and] king of Israel." (Jn 1:49) Both Philip and Nathaniel were seekers, devout Jews, looking eagerly for the one of whom the law and the prophets spoke: and they were able to see in Jesus the truth and revelation from God for which they had been waiting and searching and praying.

And so they began their new journey, their journey of discipleship with Jesus.

Today we are invited, also, to come and see and follow. Discover the truth that is in Jesus Christ. Come and see the face of God. Come and see and discover the path that leads to life. Come and see.

3rd POINT – the witness of 2000 years

We hear the Lord's call and invitation through his words to Philip and Nathaniel; and we see something of who Jesus is through their eyes and words. But we also have the advantage of looking back over 2000 years of the Christian faith, and the experience of centuries. So when we hear the invitation from Jesus Christ to come and see, when we hear the call to follow him, what do we see?

We see a world that has been transformed over the past 2000 years, by the person of Jesus Christ, and those who have been his followers. Jesus inspired people to care for the poor and needy, to reach out to those in prison, to minister to the sick and disabled, to build hospitals, pursue universal education, spread teaching through universities, and turn enemies into friends. He showed what it means to lead by example, to use authority and power in a spirit of service, to give up his life for others.

By his treatment of women as equals, worthy of being his disciples, Jesus initiated a revolution in gender relationships and in the place of women in society. His followers created a whole new community in which there was “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor male and female” (Gal 3:28) for they were all one in Christ Jesus. They showed that every life, regardless of status or gender, was worthy before God. Slaves were set free, women liberated from oppressive culture, and girls were given education and freedom to choose who to marry, on the basis of this new Christian community.

By his embrace of children - “let the little ones come to me” - and by using them as examples of discipleship - “unless you become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom” - Jesus placed immense value on the lives of all children, who otherwise in early times were seen of little value – especially if they were girls.

By his high view of marriage, he protected women from the easy divorces and rampant unfaithfulness, the sexual double standards, that were the norm in Roman and Greek times.

And the Lord’s call to come and see and follow changed the direction of many lives. As one writer put it, “Something about Jesus keeps prodding people to do what they would rather not: Francis of Assisi gives up his possessions, Augustine gives up his mistress, John Newton gives up his slave trade, and Father Damien [who went to work with lepers, and died from leprosy] gives up his health.”⁴

CONCLUSION

With Samuel, we pray “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” With the disciples, we hear the invitation to come and see and follow.

⁴ Ortberg, J. *Who is this Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. 18