

Epiphany: Knowing and Being Known

Sermon for Epiphany 2, Year B, 17 January 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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1 Samuel 3: 1-10; Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-18; 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20; John 1: 43-51

+In the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

It's a wonderful thing to be noticed, to be taken notice of, to be *known*—*truly known*. Without it we can be lost as children, growing up without direction, without self-awareness, perhaps turning out bitter and twisted. With it, we bloom and flourish—we discover ourselves and our potential; we're unlocked, so that we can come to know the world and our place in it.

It may have been a parent who truly *knew* us, whose empowering and unleashing influence we look back on with profound thankfulness. It may have been a teacher, or a mentor, or an employer, or a collaborator: someone who paid attention to us, and took time over us, and who saw in

us what others hadn't bothered to see. It may have been a priest, and for a number of us I'm sure it was. It may have been a lover, too, though the lifetime of patient attention that we can receive from a spouse holds a special sacramental dignity for Christians. Being noticed, being known, being appreciated, can unlock something in us, setting us up for the journey ahead that's uniquely ours.

Today in the Epiphany season our readings are about God knowing us and unlocking something in us. The boy Samuel, the Psalmist, Nathaniel in our Gospel, and Paul's hearers in our Epistle, are all deeply known and appreciated and reached-out-to by God, so that new possibilities are unlocked for each of them. For the boy Samuel it was a prophetic calling; for the Psalmist it was a contemplative spirit; for Nathaniel it was a deepening theological understanding of who Jesus was, while for Paul's hearers it was a vision of the chaste life that went way beyond rules and prohibitions, rooted instead in joy and belonging. Let me say a word about each, in the hope that somewhere in these four vignettes we might recognise ourselves and our calling.

First, the boy Samuel. Make no mistake about God's attentiveness to children. I was brought up hearing over and over that children should be seen and not heard. But God is attentive to children, God was attentive to Samuel, and God was attentive to me. God reaches out to Samuel more than once, knowing that it's worth being patient. Samuel's understanding is unlocked, and his lifetime adventure as a prophet begins. What prophetic dreams might be stirring in the hearts of our children and grandchildren? And how might we help rather than hinder that embryonic calling, as the priest Eli was able to help the boy Samuel?

Next, today's psalmist, who gives us a most beautiful meditation that reaches across millennia and grasps modernity's homeless mind with existential force. "O Lord you have searched me out and known me: you know when I sit or when I stand, you comprehend my thoughts long before". "You have encompassed me behind and before: you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: so high that I cannot endure it". This heart

unlocked has become a heart in love, and contemplative hearts still rest secure in the sort of loving habitat evoked by Psalm 139: in monasteries, in the prayerful silence of empty churches, in moments stolen from busy lives, on sickbeds, in death camps. The God who searches us out and knows us is revealed in contemplative prayer as our God, and gracious, and the agent of a widening attentiveness.

I move on now to Nathaniel in today's Gospel, who was brought to Jesus by our patron St Philip. But Jesus already knows Nathaniel—he sees deeply into the heart of this Israelite in whom there is no guile. Jesus sees the path to greater understanding that Nathaniel will undertake, too, beginning with Nathaniel's surprised confession that this Rabbi could really be the awaited Messiah. Jesus reveals himself to Nathaniel as he reveals Nathaniel's deepening theological journey: "You will see greater things than these. ... Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man". In other words, in Jesus God and humanity are joined, heaven and earth, with all the communication both ways

now routed through Jesus, beyond an older cosmology that called for angelic mediators. Here is a high Christological statement from John, characteristic of this fourth Gospel, as Nathaniel joins the whole Church on its journey of discovery into the riches of who Jesus is, and who we are thanks to him. This then is the theological vocation: an ever-deepening life of mutual knowing.

And finally to Paul and his hearers, in today's 1 Corinthians passage. It's easy to hear Paul's preachy-sounding warning against fornication as negative, old-fashioned, moralistic, unattractive, and certainly difficult to square with today's widespread priorities. In Paul's day, in all traditional societies, sex was strictly regulated in the interests of maintaining social order, though of course there were licensed safety valves. It's not called the oldest profession for nothing! But these days the social norm is serial polygamy while, prostitutes aside, casual sex and adultery have gone mainstream, with online porn filling in the gaps.

Yet Paul isn't trying to reimpose traditional social controls on sexual behaviour and he's certainly no enemy of bodily intimacy. Instead, he's actually jettisoning rules and inviting us to a greater depth of bodily intimacy. His authority comes from the God who knows us human beings and who unlocks a new way of being for us, by uniting us with Jesus Christ in baptism. Paul is an architect of the imagination, and his invitation here is to see ourselves as one with Christ, as bodily integrated into who Christ is. So, to prefer bodily integration in a promiscuous flux of real or virtual strangers and their bodies at the expense of a deeper, more abiding bodily intimacy would strike Paul as an imaginative failure, as a wasted opportunity.

Whenever Paul talks morality, he's really talking theology and spirituality. Hence promiscuity isn't so much an objectively wrong action as a waste of life and an imaginative dead end. It denies the deepest truth about us: that we belong to Christ, that we're loved and deeply known, so that we needn't settle for an inferior version of bodily intimacy.

So, friends, as the Epiphany season continues, we discover more about God: the God who sees us, who knows us, who unlocks things in us, offering us a new pitch of discovery and intimacy through Jesus Christ. Depending on who we are—and God knows most deeply who we are even if we might still not be too sure—God will unlock in us the prophetic, perhaps, or the contemplative, or the theological, maybe a bit of all three, along with a new ethical vision of what it is to cultivate true intimacy in a culture increasingly alienated from it. And it all starts with being seen and known and appreciated. Prophecy and contemplation, theology and the Christian ethical life all start with that.

The Lord be with you ...