

Sermon for Sunday 17th January, by Freya Bradley
Revelation 5:1-10, John 1:43-end

The theme of today's sermon is location, location, location.

The three questions we're going to answer: where was Nathanael? Where is Jesus? Where are we?

Firstly, where was Nathanael? He was under a fig tree. We don't know how long ago – it could have been five minutes ago. Why was he under the fig tree? What was he doing there? My Greek professor used to ask us this, and it stayed with me, so I went looking for other people in the Bible under trees. Elijah, after the miracle at Carmel, flees into the desert and sits under a bush and prays to die because he is so tired and afraid and burned out. Hagar, when she is cast out by Sarah, leaves her son under a tree because she cannot bear to watch him die. Jonah, when he's in a mard that God has redeemed Nineveh instead of judging them, sulks under a tree and declares himself angry enough to die.

Now I have no evidence that Nathanael was having a bad time. However, one commentary (Brodie) told me that we know "the mood was not good" under the fig tree because of the way Nathanael responds to Philip. Of all the exciting things that Philip announces (the person the scriptures were about exists right now, and he's nearby and we have encountered him!), Nathanael fixates on the Nazareth aspect. What are the places in our lives from which we believe nothing good can come? Things that have been difficult so long that we only pray for them out of habit?

Something I love about those accounts of people under trees, is that they are very honest with God. It's that kind of directness that comes from intimate friendship or pure desperation. Maybe that's why Jesus says that there is no duplicity in Nathanael. My Greek professor believed Nathanael was praying for the Saviour to come. That Jesus is essentially saying, hello, I got your message. That just as he is calling Nathanael, he is answering Nathanael's call. Maybe Nathanael was under that tree lonely, depressed, anxious, frustrated, calling out to God. When Philip calls him, he agrees to go and have a look, but when Jesus greets him, he is not immediately convinced. Maybe he's suspicious, maybe just a bit surprised. 'Where did you come to know me?'. It's what Jesus says next that wins him over, and I imagine his voice full of affection. I saw you. When you slept, or cried, or prayed, or just pondered the leaves over your head. I saw you, before anyone told you about me. I loved you before you loved me. These words cause a sudden and progressive revelation of who Jesus is: a rabbi, the son of God, the king of Israel. And Jesus promises Nathanael will see even greater things. When you're lying under a tree, looking up through the leaves, you just see glimpses of the sky, a chequered pattern of what the light looks like. But Jesus tells him he will see heaven open and angels ascending and descending upon the Son, the full revelation of his identity.

Wherever we are, Jesus sees us. Epiphanytide is there to remind us that what is farflung is not farflung to God. He sees all, hears all, gathers all to himself. The wise men came from 'afar'. God saw them, and drew them to Himself. One of the first names for God in the Bible is the God who sees – when Hagar is distressed in the desert (both times), God sees her.

God sees Elijah, God sees Jonah, God sees Nathanael. And Christ, by his Spirit, actually does see us. He sees us in our distress, our apathy, and our weariness. He sees us when we say 'Lord, this is terrible, where are you?'

The second question: where is Jesus?

We go to our Revelation passage for the answer. Last week Richard helped us explore the beginning of Jesus' ministry, this week John shows us a vision of the culmination of that ministry. Through the eyes of John, we see Jesus where he will be. It's a big spoiler, or what we once would have called an epiphany. Where is Jesus? Jesus is at the centre of the cosmos, on the steps of the father's throne. There are angels, elders, and living creatures. God is there, offering the scroll to Jesus. Ian Paul points out that John hears the announcement of the lion, and he looks...and it's a lamb. A lamb bearing the marks of slaughter. Nathanael heard too, heard an announcement, then looked, and saw someone rather different than expected. I am no expert in the interpretation of apocalyptic literature, but I am willing to venture that one reason the lamb has so many eyes is to remind us that he can see everything. John was weeping, waiting for the saviour, and now here he is. The whole story of our suffering and our redemption is put into the hands of Jesus, the only person appropriate to unroll the story of God's intention for the world. The lamb takes the scroll. This is when the worship starts for the redeemer, the saviour, the advocate. The rabbi, the son of God, the king of Israel. The lion, the root, the lamb.

Final question: where are you? Geographically, you are wherever you are. But in your heart, are you under a tree, angry, burned out, despairing? In the last week and a half, I have had many phone and text conversations with people going through really difficult things. Bereavements, traumas, and mental health issues. I have no ultimate answers to offer them, except the lamb, bearing the marks of slaughter, who sees all, who is worthy to be entrusted with the entire story of our suffering and our healing. Who stands in victory at the throne of the father, praying for us. Let us renew our faith in his promises, as Nathanael does. Let us ask God to illuminate our eyes, and unstop our ears. We have seen his star, let us adore him and sing of his worth. Amen.