

# Second Sunday after Epiphany

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## Introduction

This Sunday's text brings us immediately into the life of Jesus. From having been in Luke last week for the account of his naming, we are now brought into John, where Jesus is the one who is full of knowledge and insight. Jesus meets Philip, and Philip in turn brings Nathanael who, after initial scepticism, undergoes a change because he senses that he is known. This small narrative of John's demonstrates his depiction of Jesus: as one who brings about change in others. Change — embracing it; resisting it; demonising it; promoting it — often brings about conflict. As we think of a spirituality of conflict, it is also appropriate to think of nurturing a spirituality of change.

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## Text

John 1:43–51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

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## Comment

This Sunday's text brings us immediately into the life of Jesus. From having been in Luke last week for the account of his naming, we are now brought into John, where Jesus is the one who is full of knowledge and insight. Jesus meets Philip, and Philip in turn brings Nathanael who, after initial scepticism, undergoes a change because he senses that he is known. This small narrative of John's demonstrates his depiction of Jesus: as one who brings about change in others. Change — embracing it; resisting it; demonising it; promoting it — often brings about conflict. As we think of a spirituality of conflict, it is also appropriate to think of nurturing a spirituality of change.

John's Jesus walks into the narrative, fully formed, after the beautiful prologue (*In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*). The prologue outlines some of the major themes — light/dark; belief/unbelief — and also warns the readers not to follow John the Baptist, but rather the true light, Jesus. Then, as if with no warning, the narrator continues

*The next day...*

This phrase occurs at 1:29, 1:35, 1:43 and culminates with “*On the third day*” at 2:1 when introducing the Wedding scene.

Partly, John is building on the Genesis motif that he's been using since the opening verse, he's nicked the opening words of Genesis (In the Beginning) and also introduced themes that are opposites to each other: for the Genesis evening/morning, John has belief/unbelief and light/dark.

On top of this, though, John is also grounding his depiction of Jesus into reality. Where it began with great themes of light and darkness, belief and unbelief, John is now showing Jesus in human interaction.

Jesus is walking around Galilee, and John depicts him as having natural authority. Speaking to Philip, he calls him, and Philip follows, recruiting Nathanael also. Nathanael, however, quips about Jesus' hometown. We all have these towns in our countries: places from which you think nothing good can come.

So from having been “The Word”, Jesus is now being scoffed at for his origins, entering into the playful rivalry of neighbouring towns.

This is like a scene from so many of our conflicts. Someone who comes from a background (or ideology, or politics, or religion, or identity) that we find easy to ignore is spoken of, and we find ourselves — perhaps without even noticing — saying “How could a person like that have anything good to say?”

In this brief narrative we see what happens when our ideas about a person, or a place, are confronted by an actual encounter with a person from that place. We see Nathanael surprised into a moment of change “Where did you get to know me?” he asks. How often do we have encounters with someone from a background we distrust only to have our distrust deepened because we find what we are expecting (and, perhaps, the responsibility for that lays partly on us)?

This small narrative introducing Jesus in John's gospel is establishing his authority, and his knowledge, and his appeal. But it's also demonstrating the human condition: that we find comfort in smallmindedness, and that we can be surprised into joyful change. For many — for me, certainly — it would have been easy to have taken offence knowing that people may judge you for your background. However Jesus doesn't seem to be a person who is on the defensive here, he is praising the person who had an impoverished opinion of his origins. And in so doing, he charms Nathanael into the story of the gospel by that most meaningful thing: the sense of being known.

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## Response

This is a simple reflection.

With some trusted people, share true stories about when you've been judged for your origins or identity (or other people's projections onto your origins/identity) and when you've done the same.

Reflect on whether there was ever a time when something positive, surprising and good came about in a human encounter where people who expected no good of each other managed to meet with each other.

There is no formula for overcoming our prejudices, or overcoming other people's prejudices about us. There are some who wish to facilitate encounter; there are others who seek safety by distance. Both of these are wise things. Share with each other the ways in which you have navigated this territory, both for the expansion of smallmindedness, but also for the preservation of safety.

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## Prayer

Jesus, seeker of friends,  
even when others expected little of you  
you found the joy to bring much from them.  
Nurture our imaginations, so that when we are given little,  
we can expect much,  
and in so doing,  
see a harvest whether others were planning for poverty.  
We ask this because we flourish in kindness,  
and we know that you made kindness flourish.  
Amen.