

From this morning's gospel: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
Can anything good come out of Barnes?

I once attended a class on the importance of the whole church community engaging in mission. The teacher made his point by describing a fictional parish that was uninterested in mission. Unfortunately, he located it in Barnes. I am sorry to say that I became a bit defensive, until I saw that, perhaps inspired by inverted snobbery, the teacher had just picked a chic suburb at random.

When first told of Christ, Nathanael also reveals his snobbery, when he doubts that anything good might come from Nazareth. At least he is honest about what he thinks. And Christ identifies Nathanael as a truth-teller. But, when confronted with new evidence, truth-tellers change their minds. The evidence that changes Nathanael's mind is Jesus' understanding of him. Nathanael's recognition of Jesus as the Son of God, stems from his awareness of God as the one who knows us utterly, warts and all. Jesus is not using supernatural interview techniques to recruit the best followers, as we might see them. He is the saviour of all, not God's HR department. The first disciples, like us, are a mixed bunch. But Jesus knows them better than they know themselves. There is nothing that they or we could tell God that he does not already know.

We present ourselves honestly to God in prayer, not for his benefit, but for ours. In presenting ourselves honestly to God, we are freed from our limiting false self-perceptions, our self-loathing or self-aggrandisement, or the strange combination of the two that seems to afflict so many of us. God calls us, like he called Nathanael, as we are.

The same is true of God's calling of Samuel, our Old Testament reading today. Nathanael's first response reflects his scepticism, but Samuel's first response reflects his ignorance. Even though the Lord knows Samuel, Samuel does not yet know the Lord, so he does not know who is calling him in the night, until, guided by Eli, he answers God's call and listens. Just as, like Nathanael, we should present ourselves honestly to God, so too, like Samuel, we should listen to him. Our silence is an important part of prayer; it allows us to hear what God is saying. And what God says, again and again, is "follow me".

I love the humour in John's gospel. The first thing Philip does, when called to follow Christ, is apparently to go away from him to talk to Nathanael. But the joke is on the reader, because Philip is in fact metaphorically following Christ, who had already identified Nathanael.

This is another parallel between the callings of Samuel and Nathanael. In each case, God identifies them, but then works through someone else to call them. Eli explains to Samuel that it is God's voice he is hearing. Philip tells Nathanael to come and see Christ.

Both are surprised by God's call, but in seeing God at work, they will be surprised again. Samuel will go on to crown the first kings of Israel, and will be surprised at God's choice of ruler. Nathanael addresses Jesus as a King, but will be surprised at the nature of his kingdom, when the royal title is displayed above him on the cross. For our God is the god of surprises, and if we follow him, we will find him at work in ways and in people we do not expect.

To follow God, like Philip and Eli, is to discover those ways and to seek out those people. To seek out those, like Samuel, who do not know him. To seek out those, like Nathanael, who are sceptical. God is calling all of them. God has a plan for them. But his way of calling them is through us, through our telling of his kingdom, in our words, in our lives, in our sharing of his love. Through the work that God empowers when we present ourselves honestly to him and listen to his teaching. And if we go to those people, if we say "come and see", we will surely find that God got there first.

Can anything good come out of Barnes? Yes it can. For we come from Barnes, and God calls on us to show his goodness.