

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 17 January 2021

Music to start – 'Even Before I Was Born' by Fischy Music, sung by the Revd 'Frin Lewis-Smith
<https://youtu.be/MbmnlcagleM> (Psalm 139)

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. Today will be a Communion service so please have bread and wine or juice ready for us to share in the Lord's Table each in our own homes as we have done for the last few months.

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 139:1-6. 13-18)

Creating God, we gather in your name to worship you.

We give thanks that there is a small spark of God within us.

Kindle that small spark into a flame of love and service.

Sustaining God, we gather in your name to worship you.

We celebrate the loving presence of God in our life.

May God's loving presence be a strong influence in our life.

Nurturing God, we gather in your name to worship you.

We rejoice that God teaches us about love and forgiveness.

As we grow in faith, trust and love for God, may our worship, witness and service bring honour to God's Holy Name. Amen.

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Hymn O God, you search me and you know me (from Psalm 139) <https://youtu.be/3JPGY1w-674>

O' God, you search me, and you know me
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze
When I walk or lie down, you are before me
'Ever the maker and keeper of my days.

You know my resting and my rising
You discern my purpose from afar
And with love everlasting, you besiege me
In ev'ry moment of life or death, you are.

Before a word is on my tongue, Lord
You have known its meaning through and through
You are with me beyond my understanding
God of my present, my past and future, too.

Although your Spirit is upon me
Still I search for shelter from your light
There is nowhere on Earth I can escape you
Even the darkness is radiant in your sight.

For you created me and shaped me
Gave me life within my mother's womb
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you
Safe in your hands, all creation is made new.

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Sung by The University of Notre Dame Folk Choir

Opening prayer

Gentle and patient
God, you are calling.
Careful and persistent
God, you are calling.
In grieving and in praise
God, you are calling.
Through dawn and midday
God, you are calling.
Unexpected and planned
God, you are calling.

In a still small voice and in power
God, you are calling.
Spontaneous and prepared
God, you are calling.
Willing or protected
God, you are calling.
Our God is eager to share with us,
wherever we are in our journey.
May we be diligent to listen.
God, you are calling.

~ written by Joanie Thurman Williams

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Beloved God, you know us inside and out and you still call us to serve you.
Lord, honestly we are often hesitant, afraid, and wish to remain hidden.
Empower us to listen for and to hear your call
Empower us to answer your call with "Here I am Lord"
Empower us to follow you when you call us to follow you. **Amen**

Prayer of Confession

God of justice and forgiveness, we confess that we live in a world
in which some are hungry even for bread,
many people are sad or hurt, and there is much that is unfair and unjust.
We confess that in our own lives we do not always do what is right
or turn away from what is wrong.
We ask your forgiveness, we claim your love and mercy,
and we ask for courage to make a new beginning. In the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen**

Christ Jesus came into the world to forgive sinners. To all who turn to him, he says: 'Your sins are forgiven.' He also says: 'Follow me.' Amen

Offertory

You are reminded to send in your gifts for the work of the church by cheque or bank transfer.

God, whose giving knows no ending,
we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;
we offer up ourselves in service and praise.
Receive these gifts by your grace.
Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

written by Joanna Harader, <http://spaciousfaith.com/>

Bible reading: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

Sermon

What stuck with me most from today's Gospel reading was the interaction between Jesus and Nathanael and that well known phrase – 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Nathanael is judging Jesus before he has even met him, because of where he comes from. This is something we still do today. People are still judged by the way they sound for example, – a west country accent brings to mind the stereotype of a country bumpkin, strong northern accents are often interpreted as implying less education. For years news readers were required to speak in RP – required pronunciation – that 1950s, posh sounding accent, believed to be more reliable than regional accents. TV presenters now have more of a range of accents, but I doubt we'll even hear the BBC news read in a strong Essex accent! Did Jesus have an accent from Nazareth? We'll never know, but presumably he did. He came from a small town, village really, in the north, not from the cosmopolitan city of Jerusalem. People would have had preconceptions in their mind about him, just like Nathanael did. Just like we have today about Scousers or Geordies, Cockney's or Essex Girls. The point is people judge others. Often with little knowledge or little provocation. There was a UCC devotion I read during the week that said:

Maybe you've seen the doodle that illustrates why we should be gentle with people: A long horizontal line represents someone's entire life. Then there's a bracket covering the last eighth of the line, labelled "what you know about" their life. In other words, next to nothing.

In South Africa they say, "everyone sits beside their own pool of tears," meaning that we all carry some pain, the oppressed and their oppressors alike, the ones who seem to have it all together no less than the ones who are a mess. And still we are quick to judge, reluctant to forgive, afraid to reconcile, and often anything but gentle.

There has been quite a lot of talk in the news this week about personal responsibility – the need for us all to observe the lockdown rules and for the police to enforce them. There was the story of Boris being seen cycling 7 miles from his house and had that broken lockdown rules by not being 'local'? You probably know that I'm no fan of Boris and the government have not managed this pandemic well. None of us need reminding of the Dominic Cummings, Barnard Castle debacle which did cause people to think there was one rule for us and another for 'them'. But as someone who used to cycle a lot, 7 miles is not much on a bike. Let's talk about what he really hasn't delivered on, not on whether a long bike ride constitutes leaving a local area or not! Or in terms of Nathanael, judge Jesus by what he says and does, not by where he comes from.

Judging a book by its cover is never a good idea. Judging others, especially on hearsay, or accent, or where they come from before meeting them, like Nathanael did, is not a good idea. But Jesus did not go along with Nathanael's judgmental attitude. He is not put off by Nathanael's stereotype of people from Nazareth, but replies with generosity, praising Nathanael, - 'here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit'. And then he has a great comeback when Nathanael asks how Jesus could know anything about him – 'I saw you under the fig tree' and Nathanael then suddenly declares that Jesus is the Son of God! Jesus finds a way to gently bring Nathanael into discipleship.

Now, I don't know why the fact that Jesus saw him under a fig tree should lift the veil from Nathanael's eyes. Even Jesus himself seems surprised at Nathanael's sudden and absolute confession of faith: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God!' It looks like Jesus is surprised as he responds with possible humour, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?' It is not obvious to the reader how Nathanael is transformed from a naysayer to a spokesman of faith in a matter of moments. Nathanael seems to be a master of suspicion and pre-judgement, although he may have reasons for not thinking highly of people from Nazareth.

Nazareth was a small village during the days of Jesus, perhaps boasting a population of only a few hundred. And Nazareth did not have the greatest of reputations politically. Following the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, the Roman armoury in Sepphoris (only four miles from Nazareth) was robbed, and the Romans retaliated by crucifying 2,000 Jews as a disincentive to such revolts. Sepphoris was burned to the ground, and its inhabitants were sold into slavery. Less than a decade later, when Jesus was just a boy, Judas the Galilean instituted a tax revolt, evoking another crackdown by the Romans in which many were also crucified. Jesus must have been aware of Roman persecutions of Jewish insurrectionists as a child, and this may have contributed to his

teachings regarding loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek. But Jesus wasn't valued even by his fellow Nazarethans (if that's what you call people from Nazareth!) In Luke 4, after he preached his first sermon there, he was run out of town and as far as we know he never went back.

So, when Nathanael, who tends to see the negative, gives such a positive declaration of who Jesus is, after just meeting him, our expectations are overturned. What is going on here? The drama in this story counts on the fact that Nathanael, doesn't tend to act in a positive manner. He doesn't get easily excited. He is sceptical of Jesus, because of where he comes from, but his faith overcomes his suspicion. Nathanael himself was startled when the reality of Jesus snapped unexpectedly into focus. There is something about that fig tree remark that made *who* Jesus is clear for Nathanael. The reader doesn't get to see what exactly transformed Nathanael's view of Jesus, but what is clear is that epiphanies about Christ come to different people in such drastically different ways that it can be incomprehensible to others. But not to God. For unlike humans who pre-judge and speculate and buy into stereotypes, God knows us. Even before we speak a word, God knows what we will say. God formed us in the womb, made us 'wonderfully' as Psalm 139 tells us. And such knowledge is too wonderful and incomprehensible for human minds to grasp.

Would that we knew and recognised and loved others as God does, without judgement and suspicion.

Hymn Called by the love of Christ (pre-recorded by Thora)

Called by the love of Christ to be
life's flavour hid from sight:
yet challenged by that self-same love
to shine like beacons bright,
Lord, when our neighbours' lives are grim,
decaying, dark as night,
empow'r us, in the name of love,
to live as salt and light!

Called by the love of Christ to bear
his kingdom-bringing fruit;
yet only when we're grafted firm
to his life-giving root,
Lord, when, exhausted, each becomes
a withered, dying shoot,
re-graft, restore us by your love
to grow and bear your fruit!

Called by the love of Christ to hold
God's treasure, rich and rare;
yet in ourselves but rough clay pots,
just common kitchenware,
Lord, show your love by using us
as vessels of your care,
that cracked and chipped and used and worn
we'll prove that you are there!

Lord's Supper as you follow at home, please say the words in bold

We are gathered here not because we have seen fit to choose Christ,
but because he has looked upon us and called us to be his own.

O God, you have searched me and known me,
you read my every thought from afar,
There is not a word on my tongue
that you do not know altogether.

The joy of those who hear the call of Christ be with you all.

And also with you.

Let us celebrate this joyful feast.
People will come from east and west and north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.
You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.
You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations,
and the gathered wisdom of many years.
You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up
in difficult times where there was little peace.
He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.
He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.
He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.
For these things, he suffered.
For these things, he died.
And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.
You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us,
to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.
For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people
on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

This is the mystery of faith:

**Christ took the form of a slave
Christ took the cross of shame
Christ gives the free gift of life.**

Send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it
and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this is remembrance of me. In the same way
he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as
you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you
proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom,
and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Gracious God, we pray today, for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them,
through volunteering at foodbanks, by donating food and money, or by speaking out and raising
awareness of issues.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for scientists and all those working to deliver vaccines, for doctors, nurses, porters and
cleaners, carers and their families, as they battle tiredness and depression to keep going.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for world leaders and democratic systems. Let them not be abused and help us not to be
overtaken by apathy and despair when it seems that democracy is flawed. Especially this week, we
pray for Joe Biden and his team and that there may be a peaceful transfer of power in the USA>

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who feel lonely and sad, locked in their homes again, not able to see family or
friends. And for all those who have had COVID-19 or lost a loved one to the virus.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those awaiting test results or
treatment, for the dying and those who mourn. May your infinite love and grace surround them and
bring them peace, in Jesus' name. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn Now let us from this table rise, (recorded by Thora in August)

Now let us from this table rise
renewed in body, mind, and soul;
with Christ we die and rise again,
his selfless love has made us whole.

To fill each human house with love,
it is sacrament of care;
the work that Christ began to do
we humbly pledge ourselves to share.

With minds alert, upheld by grace,
to spread the Word in speech and deed
we follow in the steps of Christ,
at one with all in hope and need.

Then grant us grace, Companion-God,
to choose again the pilgrim way,
and help us to accept with joy
the challenge of tomorrow's day.

Fred Kaan, © Stainer & Bell Ltd

Blessing

Wherever you go this week, know this:
God knows you better than you know yourself.
No matter where you go or what you do, God is already there,
surrounding you with mercy and guiding you with love.
So go with joy and confidence, knowing that God goes with you. Amen

Music to end: Sent by the Lord am I – sung by Naomi