

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 lives.
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.

Hymn O God, you search me MP1343

Offering

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.**

Opening Prayers

URC Prayer Handbook p8

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

Hymn Lord of creation MP440 omit v3 (Tune *Slane* at 882)

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

Today's two readings are about knowing people. God knows each and every one of us before we are born, so Psalm 139 tells us – even before a word is on my tongue, God knows it completely. God knit me together in my mother's womb. God knows the number of our days, and at the end God is still with us. And then in John's Gospel, Jesus knows Nathanael before he has even spoken to him. Nathanael thinks he knows Jesus, because

of where Jesus is from, but finds out his prejudices and misconceptions are wrong and after Jesus speaks only one sentence, Nathanael declares him to be the Son of God. This is a pretty strange passage, but perhaps we should not be surprised from a writer who starts his Gospel account with the mystery of the Word being with God in the beginning of time and then becoming flesh and living among us – it's not your typical nativity play!

The question of Jesus' origins permeates John's Gospel, beginning with the majestic and mysterious prologue that corresponds to the grand expectations many people had for God's anointed one. Surely, they thought, the Messiah would appear in or near the great city of Jerusalem, site of political and economic power, religious authority, and God's own dwelling place in the Temple. Given such a context of expectation, one might forgive Nathanael for sounding like a disgruntled teenager, reflecting the prevailing view that nothing good can come from Galilee (Galilee being the region in which lay the small town of Nazareth). See chapter 7 for the people proclaiming that no prophet has ever come from Galilee, and the Messiah is supposed to be from Bethlehem. Who would imagine that God's anointed one could come from a place so distant from the centre of power? A messiah from Nazareth, in Galilee?! Inconceivable!

Even today some are incredulous to hear that Christ may be found in a dementia unit, a hospital room, beneath the rubble of a bombed-out city, or even lifted up on a Roman cross - places where Christ can indeed be found. God is not obliged to be confined by Nathanael's limiting expectations, or ours. Indeed, it is the central claim of John's Gospel that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" – so why couldn't he come from Nazareth and be a poor carpenter's son. It's not so long ago we heard how he was born in very lowly circumstances and then had to flee to Egypt for his life.

Nathanael judges 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 ever 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, Cockneys or Essex Girls. The point is people judge others. Often with little knowledge or little provocation. In

reality we know very little about anyone else's life or suffering. 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. Yet still, we are quick to judge, reluctant to forgive, afraid to reconcile, and often anything but gentle with other people.

Judging a book by its cover is never a good idea. (case in point the book I'm reading – Demon Copperhead – I wasn't struck by the title or the cover and only bought it because it was half price and by an author I'd heard of – it has turned out to be an excellent read!)

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 suddenly declares that Jesus is the Son of God! Jesus finds a way to gently bring Nathanael into discipleship rather than antagonising him or judging him.

We know next to nothing about Nathanael, but Jesus knows him – he doesn't make a casual comment about where Nathanael comes from, Cana as it happens, or what his occupation is, something he might have heard from Philip or others; no Jesus goes straight to describe his character – someone without deceit, in other words truthful and honest. Perhaps that is why Nathanael recognises Jesus as the Son of God so quickly – he would have known the psalms; he would know that only God knows us inside and out even before we are born. Nathanael appears nowhere else in the New Testament. Apart from briefly in chapter 21 of John. While he is included as a disciple there, he is not mentioned in any other list of disciples, or in any other gospel. The silence on Nathanael and his background might cause us to speculate on reasons for his negativity about Jesus. Was there some rivalry between Cana and Nazareth that we don't know about, something like the divisions that often occur in congregations between long-time and new members, commitments to external outreach versus care for the members we already have, differing political views and so on. It seems unlikely, as right after this encounter Jesus is invited to a wedding at Cana where he changes water into wine. Whatever the origin of Nathanael's opinion, neither Jesus nor Philip argues with him. Instead, Jesus stands nearby observing and Philip simply invites Nathanael to "come and see" - apparently, a very good evangelism strategy.

Nathanael may have other 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. The area did not have the greatest reputation politically. Following the death of Herod the Great, 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 again 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. Though of course, Jesus wasn't valued even by his fellow townsfolk. In Luke 4 we heard that 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 very short 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. His background knowledge of the scriptures – that God knows the heart of each of us, shone a light of Jesus' knowledge of his character – a lightbulb moment! Nathanael himself seemed startled when the reality of Jesus snapped unexpectedly into focus. 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.

Nathanael's scepticism foreshadows several episodes in John where people come to believe in Jesus via doubt or at least questions – Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, even doubting Thomas. In the world of John's Gospel, a questioning faith may well lead to believing that Jesus is the one who has come from God. Questions are good – assumptions, prejudice and judging a book by its cover, not so much!

Hymn Father God, the Lord, Creator MP130

LORD'S SUPPER

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

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 has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

Lord God, 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 in 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

Eternal God, you are the maker of us all, and we are your creation,
people formed in your image, as individuals, as community;
formed and fed and furnished with understanding of who you are
and of who we are.

We worship you today in recognition of your calling, of your communicating,
of your caring to invite us to share in your creative and healing work.

We are here because we have heard you speak in us and through others.

Help us, dear Lord, to respond to you and your invitation to your grace.

Lord hear our prayer...

God of all our moments, of our days and our nights,
you speak and you act in the world around us, not only to call all people to you,
but also to direct and guide us in the way of healing and wholeness.

Awaken us Lord, to hear what you would say to us.

Help us to open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts to your presence.

Help us to know when it is your voice we are hearing

and it when it is our prejudices and desires to which we are paying heed.

Lord hear our prayer...

Lord, we pray that your church may rise up with renewed commitment
in answer to your call, that your people may be instruments of your grace and love.

Lord hear our prayer....

We pray for those who consider themselves inadequate
and dismiss or avoid your calling in their lives.

Give them a new vision, a vision in which you are their strength and their hope.

Lord hear our prayer....

We pray for those who, in answering your call,
must leave the known for the unknown,
the oasis for the desert, the comfortable for the uncertain.
Grant them courage and steadfast faith...

Lord hear our prayer....

We pray too, today, O Lord, for those in want and need –
for those of us and of the wider community who suffer in body or in soul.

We remember before you particularly all those of our own church family who are ill - SILENCE

Lord, hear our pray.....

We pray for all those living in poverty, the homeless, those who don't have enough to eat, all those
affected by any kind of violence. We pray for all the people living through war in Gaza and Ukraine
and for those affected by climate change in recent floods and earthquakes. And we pray for and
with all who feel lonely and sad. For those struggling with addictions and those living mental health
conditions, with autism and other leaning difficulties.

Lord, hear our pray.....

Loving Father, bless us all with an abundant faith, a fruitful ministry, a joyful life.

Bless us and all those who gather together to continue the work of Jesus,
who taught us to pray as one family, saying...

Our Father....

Hymn The love of God comes close MP 940 omit v5

Blessing

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 14 Jan. 2024

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

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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