

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 15 January 2011 - Epiphany 2 (Year B)
John 1.43-51

I still haven't made up my mind about the new Sherlock Holmes series, the one with Benedict Cumberbatch in the starring role. Do I like my Sherlock transposed into the modern world, with the Hound of the Baskervilles revealed to be the result of a mind-altering drug produced by a deranged scientist at a top-secret research lab, or do I prefer him in full Victorian garb, tracking the beast over the wilds of Exmoor and solving the case in the traditional manner? I feel the same about Shakespeare plays or Mozart operas in modern dress. Sometimes it works, sometimes it seems pointless. It's not a million miles away from arguments about how the Bible should be read and used. Do we try to make it fit in to modern ways of thinking, in order to make sense of its often puzzling or problematic texts, or are we to fit in to what it says by entering its world and trying to understand it? Actually, we don't need to choose. There is room for both.

We've done a little detective work ourselves this morning, of the second kind. The passage at the end of the first chapter of John's Gospel is, to put it mildly, strange to modern ears. A man called Nathanael has been told by friends that they have found the Messiah and that he comes from a tiny village in Galilee. Nathanael is not impressed, as he famously remarks, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' As if someone had told us that the Son of God had been born in a deeply unfashionable place, let's say Scunthorpe (actually, Honeyburge might fit better for size, but not all of you will know where that is, so there's some more detective work for you). He goes to see Jesus, who salutes him as an Israelite in whom there is no guile or deceit. Nathanael wonders how Jesus knew this. The explanation is that Jesus had seen him earlier under the fig-tree, which makes one wonder, especially as Nathanael's response is to confess that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel, which seems quite premature. Jesus then tells him that the fig-tree business is nothing in comparison to what he will see - the heavens

opening and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, at which point modern people may be inclined to give up.

You could try a modern twist and replace the fig-tree with the bus station, but even so, the whole scene is hard to fathom and seems to have little relevance to the kinds of questions and issues we face in our daily lives. Can Jesus really read people's characters by seeing them at a distance? Do we make important decisions just like that? We could write it off and look for a more interesting passage, but its place at the end of the programmatic first chapter of John, as we have already discovered, seems to be telling us something. Nathanael only appears here, at the end of the first chapter, and then as a witness to the risen Christ by the Sea of Galilee, at the start of the final one. Only there do we learn that he is from Cana in Galilee, the setting for the first of the signs Jesus performs, the turning of water into wine at a wedding-feast, 'on the third day' following his conversation with Nathanael. That innocuous phrase, 'on the third day', offers a further clue to Sherlocks, for it contains an unmistakable reference to the Resurrection: 'on the third day he rose again'.

In our search for further clues to solve the mystery, two others need attention. Jesus calls Nathanael 'an Israelite in whom there is no guile', and Nathanael confesses his faith for the seemingly trivial reason that Jesus saw him earlier under the fig-tree. As a lover of figs and a grower of fig trees this second clue has always appealed to me, but they have a deeper biblical meaning. I Kings 4.25 tells us that under Solomon Judah and Israel lived in safety, 'all of them under their vines and fig trees'. The same idea is repeated in Micah 4.4, but as part of the days to come, when the mountain of the Lord's house will be established and 'they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees'. To be under the fig tree is associated, then, with peace and security, either in this life or in the Messianic age. In Micah's prophetic vision it is a future which all the nations are to share, as Israel recovers her true destiny: she is chosen to be a light to draw all the nations to God, not to shut them out because they are impure and idolatrous. The

true Israelite is one who understands Israel's true vocation, and Nathaniel from Cana in Galilee is a true Israelite indeed.

The sign Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee following their conversation is followed in John by the cleansing of the temple. Although, unlike the Synoptics, John does not quote the text about the temple being a house of prayer for all the nations which has been taken over by robbers, the action of Jesus is clearly intended to restore the temple to its primary purpose, worship, not trade, and he associates its destruction and raising with his own death and resurrection. The marriage at Cana is situated, then, between the encounter of Jesus with Nathaniel, who will later be revealed to be from Cana and who is a true Israelite, and the cleansing of the temple for its true purpose, in preparation for what Jesus will later tell the woman of Samaria: of the hour coming when 'true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (4.23), not in any particular hallowed place. The Cana narrative asks similar questions about the nature of true religion, through the transformation of ritual water into festive wine, by the one who has been sent by the Father to give power to *all* those who receive him and believe in his name to become the children of God, not only those who are Israelites according to the flesh.

There is one final clue, in the words of Jesus to Nathanael about seeing the heavens opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Where is it that angels ascend and descend but on the ladder seen by the patriarch Jacob in his dream in Genesis 28? So Nathanael will see what Jacob saw: the link between the earthly and the heavenly, only this time not as a ladder connecting them, but in the Son of Man, Jesus. He will see the true nature of Jesus, as God's gift of his very self, embracing the life we lead on earth but lifting us to the eternal life of heaven. When he stands by the lake shore and shares breakfast with the risen Lord the promise is fulfilled.

Well, we may have begun to solve some of the mysteries of this passage. But has it anything to say to us? One thing we can learn is how important it is to attend carefully to the words Scripture uses and to treat it as a whole, so that we can read it and it us more

deeply. This is not simply a journalistic account of a meeting and a conversation. Even the newspapers are selective in what they report. This is an encounter shot through with meanings which lie beneath the surface of the text and can only be accessed by sensitive reading and listening. It connects with what precedes and what follows it and we need to find those connections. It is rooted in the hopes and the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, and we need to hear their voice too. There is no detail wasted in the Gospel of John: everything is there for a purpose. In parts of the Church today there is far too much waving around of texts divorced from their context in order to prove this or that point and far too little of the prayerful, meditative reading of Scripture which brings its message alive and constantly surprises us by its freshness. We have only scratched the surface this morning, but at least we have begun.

The other element which strikes me as interesting is the figure of Nathanael. He never appears in any list of disciples, yet clearly he is one. His name is absent from the moment it appears until he stands on the shore as the disciples prepare to go fishing, catch nothing, and are told by a stranger on the beach to cast their nets to the other side, which, John tells us, is the third appearance of the risen Lord after his death. These are his only appearances in the New Testament. Our names are not there either. We follow the stories about Peter, James, John and the others but maybe it doesn't occur to us that we are being called to discipleship as we go about our business. As John's Gospel unfolds water is turned into wine, the temple cleansed, a searcher comes to Jesus by night, a Samaritan woman is promised everlasting water; the lame walk, the crowds are fed, the blind are helped to see and the dead are raised to life. In all these moments, each of them resonant with meaning, Nathanael is not mentioned, nor are we; and yet we are there, precisely because we are here, in our own world, as ministers of Christ's love, wherever people hunger and thirst for it, search for it, stumble, cannot see it, find too much suffering and death around them for any light to shine amid such darkness. We become Nathanael when we understand that religion is to be a power for good, when we

seek justice above our own comforts and understand that ritual and doctrine are not ends in themselves but responses which both witness to and support the call to embody the light and the love of Christ. We become Nathanael the first moment something, however seemingly trivial, sparks off in us the desire to follow the Christ; and when the risen Lord reveals himself to us in the midst of our everyday tasks. Here, then, is a parable of discipleship, from beginning to end; formed of a conversation, a confession of faith and a promise that as we follow, we shall come to see how the earthly and the heavenly are bound together in the one dynamic movement of self-giving love.