

Epiphany 2: John 1. 43-51

There is a key moment in the exchange between Jesus and these early disciples. Nathanael has made a rather disparaging comment about Nazareth, Jesus' hometown as it were, and Jesus spots him, and compliments him on his honesty and candour, and then Nathanael opens the door to a much deeper discussion with the question: "Where did you come to know me?"; or phrased a bit differently "How do you know who I am?"

Identity is one of the issues at large in the first part of this chapter. St John locates the Word of God as being from the beginning, but now concretely in the flesh and made human, in the person whom John the Baptist foreshadows: in other words this Jesus of Nazareth, whom John also calls the Lamb of God. The focus then switches from divine identity to human identity in the person of Nathanael. And it is as if Nathanael here represents all of humanity asking the question of Jesus "How do you know who I am?"

Most of us are fascinated with knowing more about ourselves and our background, hence the popularity of TV programmes such as *Who do you think you are?* The entertainment value here lies in the tension between the hopes of the enquirers between an eminent or at least interesting ancestor, and the reality of a mean scoundrel, a bigamist, or worse, someone rather dull. The more serious part seems to happen when the relative taps into a stream of national or international history, being a holocaust survivor for example. I wonder if much the same could be said about the appeal of *Antiques Roadshow* or *The Repair Shop* (so now you know what I watch on the telly).

But this passage is not about us knowing ourselves better, but about how Jesus knows us, how God knows us. I think there are echoes here of Psalm 139:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. / You know when I sit down and when I rise up; / you discern my thoughts from far away. / You search out my path and my lying down, / and are acquainted with all my ways. ... For it was you who formed my inward parts; / you knit me together in my mother's womb. / I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Our prayer life – those solitary and difficult attempts to still our bodies and minds, not praying for anything or anyone – is often and rightly focussed on trying to know God better, perhaps prompted by short meditations on the Scriptures. The small book *Rule for a New Brother* (and I include Sister here) contains a stark warning:

Brother, [or Sister] / you want to seek God with all your life, / and love Him with all your heart. / But you would be wrong if you thought you could reach Him. / Your arms are too short, your eyes are too dim, / your heart and understanding too small. / To seek God means first of all to let yourself be found by Him. / He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. / He is the God of Jesus Christ. He is your God, not because He is yours / but because you are His.

So instead of Nathanael's rather shrill and combative "Where did you come to know me?", our prayers become a process of letting God know us, of disclosing ourselves more and more to God, in the paradoxical knowledge that since God has created us, God knows us already. But do we dare to acknowledge this, and if so then to utter praise? When we begin, our imaginations may picture wonderful things: better than the doubtful ancestor, more interesting than revered family treasure, and more like the heavens opened up, and the angels ascending and descending on those whom God has loved and created. Amen

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