**17th January 2021**

We have come together into the presence of our Lord.
So, let us quieten our hearts and minds,
put aside our concerns and distractions.
Let us open ourselves to listen for God’s voice,
for the word God has for his people.

Jesus says Come follow me.



**A gathering prayer**

Almighty God, you speak to us in so many ways.
Help us, in our worship today, to hear your voice and
know it is you.
Speak to us in the silence, through Scripture and by the Spirit.
Speak through others and through your creation,
through images, experiences, music and encounters.
Speak in ways that we can understand.
So, speak, Lord – and help us to listen.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Creator God, how awesome you are!
Our lives were known to you before we came into being.
Marvellous Lord,
Everything we do, think and say – you know about.

Such infinite wonder!
Eternal, loving Lord,
Ever helping us to see and be more like you.

How awesome you are, glorious Lord.
Everywhere we go your hand is with us,
Always guiding and
Revealing your blessings – as we praise, listen and act.
**Amen.**



**Prayers of penitence**

A prayer of confession

Lord, we come before you to say sorry. Sorry for all the times we’ve let you, ourselves and others down. Sometimes, Lord, we’re so busy talking and doing that we fail to hear you. We miss the still small voice saying, ‘Stop. Listen.’ Lord, we’re sorry for being too busy to hear you. You speak in so many different ways, Lord, one being through other people – but very often we take no notice and continue in our own way. Help us to
tune in to your voice.

Lord, as you use others to speak to us, so you use us to draw people to you. But speaking does not always require words. People see our lives, our attitudes and character. Lord, we’re sorry for the times we’ve let you down in these areas – when we pressurise others to conform to our ideas, or fail to listen and give others the space to draw closer to you.

Lord, as we spend these few moments in personal reflection, we ask you to speak to us. Show us anything for which we need to say sorry – and change our ways.
Lord, we lift our confessions to you, in your precious name.
**Amen.**

 Assurance of forgiveness

Father God, we thank you that we don’t have to earn your forgiveness.
It is not based on how worthy we are.
We are forgiven through Christ Jesus.
It is by grace that our sins are forgiven.
**Amen.**



**The Lord’s Prayer**

**John 1.43-51**

It was announced on Wednesday this week that perhaps this year’s GCSE and A Level exams *haven’t*been cancelled after all[[1]](#endnote-1). Instead, there might be [mini exams in some or all of the subjects](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55641364).

If you’re in year 11 or 13 this is a lot to take in i.e. trying to work out what it means for you to miss your exams, and now having to think about what to revise and how that will affect your final grades. Even if you’re not in an exam year, things are still changing rapidly, there is a lot of uncertainty.

What is interesting about all the change we are experiencing is that we are probably all reacting in different ways. For some of us the situation is making us anxious; others may quite like being at home; some may be relieved that the exams were cancelled and are now worried about the proposed mini-exams; others may be pleased about the mini-exams, preferring to have the option to show what they know in an end-of-year test than being assessed across lots of pieces of work.

The passage this week (John 1. 43-51) also shows some very different reactions to a situation of change. Jesus asks Nathanael and Philip to follow him, to stop leading their old lives and to have a new life as his disciples. Jesus’ offer means great change and uncertainty.

Philip reacts with great excitement. He seems to embrace the change offered and rushes off to find Nathanael to invite him to join the adventure. But Nathanael is much more cautious, suspicious even. Nathanael doesn’t jump for joy, rather he quizzes Jesus on who he is and what’s going on. The same situation plays out very differently. But eventually Philip and Nathanael both become followers of Jesus. Both, though very different, are part of God’s plan.

Whatever you are feeling, however you are reacting, you are part of God’s big plan. God doesn’t need one type of person, but all sorts of people with different emotions who can live and learn together.

When Jesus invites Philip and Nathanael to ‘come follow me’ as a way to help them find their purpose and identity, Jesus is offering a counter cultural challenge to people today. Graham Tomlin[[2]](#endnote-2) has a new book out called Why Being Yourself is a Bad Idea. He says the challenge of Jesus challenges one of the most common bits of wisdom we tell each other these days.

You’re going for a job interview, nervously anticipating a first date or meeting someone you want to impress. You go to a friend to ask for advice and what are you told? There’s a fair chance you’ll get the advice: ‘Just be yourself’. The wellbeing or spirituality sections of any bookstore thrive on such a message: we create who we are, we have draw on our inner self, find ourselves. It is the turning inwards to find our meaning and purpose.

Charles Taylor the Canadian Philosopher put his finger on the way we think about ourselves compared to how people thought in the past[[3]](#endnote-3). In past times, most people believed that they fitted into a large cosmic order, held together by God or some kind of universal moral law. The wider structure was given, you didn’t choose it. To find wisdom, moral guidance therefore, you looked outside yourself to God of the moral or natural law.

Over the past few centuries, many people in the West have abandoned faith in God or any sense of a given cosmic order. As a result, there is no longer any overarching sacred structure as Taylor calls it which holds the world together. So, we are left on our own as individuals in a world without any pre-determined architecture or meaning that tells us who we are and that gives a sense of security and identity within a wider scheme of things. We have to create it for ourselves.

Of course, we actually find it impossible to live in total chaos with no structure. Where do we look for moral guidance and direction? We look into our own hearts. We look inside. We look into our own emotions and desires. The cult of authenticity is the idea of being ‘true to oneself’ or finding yourself. As if we are able to peel off every layer of expectation laid upon us by society, the artificial construction of identity, gender, class and occupation., the irritating demands that others place upon us, we would be able to find our true selves hidden within. Like a cook peeling an artichoke, peeling away the rough leaves to find tender heart inside.

Yet what if in fact we are more like onions than artichokes? What if when we peel away the expectations of others, the roles we play in society, we get to the centre to find there is nothing there? What if there is no mysterious ‘self’ waiting to be discovered?

An alternative and much more ancient view is that our selves are not so much discovered as created. Of course, we are born with particular DNA and ancestry. Yet from our birth we are also shaped and moulded by life experiences. We shape our inner lives over our lifetimes by the choices we make, the commitments we enter into and the habits that take root and the way we react to what happens to us.

Biblically, Jesus invites people to ‘come and follow’ - as in this passage and his invitation to Philip and Nathanael. Elsewhere in the gospels he says *if any want to become his followers they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him* (Mark8.34) I don’t think he means we should erase ourselves or become a doormat for others but the idea is similar to what Paul describes in his letters: *taking off the old life and putting on the new life in Christ, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness* (Eph 4.22-24). Paul argues that the death and resurrection of Jesus opens up the possibility of discovering our true selves in Christ.

When Jesus was asked ‘what is the greatest commandment?’ he didn’t say as many a modern lifestyle guru would say: ‘Be yourself’. Rather he quoted scripture ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and secondly love your neighbour as yourself’. This according to Jesus is the secret of a good life – not learning to ‘be ourselves’.

I expect that the most saintly and attractive people you have ever met were not consciously trying to be ‘themselves’ – actually they were not thinking of themselves at all – they were more interested in you and what you had to say. In fact, our moments of greatest joy are usually those moments of sheer wonder, when we are transfixed by spectacular view, a piece of music that seems just perfect, an example of astonishing sporting prowess or the delight in someone we have fallen in love with. In those moments of fascination of something or someone outside ourselves, we lose for a precious moment the crippling self-consciousness that so often cramps and diminishes us.

Martin Luther described the human condition as consisting of ‘the heart curved in upon itself’. The heart turned inwards in self-regard, self-consciousness rather than turned outwards towards God, the source of life, and to our neighbours around us.

It’s like a flower that instead of being stretched out towards the sun, shrinks back away from the light and turns back towards the soil, shriveling up, losing its colour and life, slowly dying a long slow death.

Jesus’ call on our lives is just as a flower has to be drawn towards the sun by that great source of life and heat, so we too need something more powerful and compelling than the hurts and anxieties that constrict and constrain us. That is what we can find in the grace of God, shown in the face of Jesus. He enables this flowering of our true selves. This is the invitation of Jesus: the invitation to lose your crippling self-obsession and learn to love God and love your neighbour and to become truly happy in the process.

In the gospel story these two friends have an unexpected encounter with Jesus and initially react in very different ways. Together, Philip and Nathanael help each other to understand who Jesus is and they begin a journey that will redefine who they are.

Nathanael is surprised that Jesus knows not only his name, but much about him too. Jesus knows each of us as individuals but sometimes, like Nathanael, we can wonder ‘Why would God be interested in me?’ Some of us will be, like Philip, keen to follow straight away. Some of us will be more like Nathanael – full of questions and concerns. This story shows that wherever we are, Jesus finds us and knows us. Are we looking and listening out for him – and helping others to do so?

It’s wonderful when a small child comes bouncing up, full of excitement and longing to share something. Perhaps Philip approached Nathanael in this way, bursting with good news: he has found the Messiah! If so, he must have been disappointed when Nathanael brushed off his announcement contemptuously: Nazareth! Can anything good come from there? Says Nathanael, cynically. It’s easy to be downhearted when people don’t share our enthusiasm for Jesus. We might even wonder if we have made a mistake. But it is not up to us to form someone else’s relationship with Jesus. We can trust Jesus himself to do that, in his own time and with his own words, as he did for Nathanael.

How do you find out if something is true? The internet may be our ‘go to’ these days. But, even with fact-checking websites, can we trust the information we find there? What is reliable? What is fake?

We live in a time when knowledge—*real* knowledge—is doubted. Our English word ‘science ‘comes to us from the Latin, *scientia*, which simply means ‘knowledge’ or ‘knowing’. Yet, can you think of another time in your life when even the wildest conspiracy theories were taken as ‘fact’ by millions of people? The USA election results have been counted again and again, but Trump and his followers *choose* to believe otherwise. His lies have resulted in five people being killed in riots he incited at the capital. No wonder they want to impeach him.

One of the most pernicious aspects of modern Western thought is the belief that ‘one opinion is as good as another.’ [John Henry Newman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henry_Newman) once wrote: ‘We can believe what we choose. We are answerable for what we choose to believe.’ His words could have been written for us today.

These new disciples wanted to find out more about Jesus. Were John’s claims about him true? Was he really the Messiah? No hi-tech options for them. ‘Come and see,’ said Jesus, and they spent the day with him in conversation, sharing food, and enjoying each other’s company. Simply being together with each other and with the Lord creates effective opportunities for checking out our feelings and intuitions and trying to get the facts straight. Fellowship has always been at the heart of Christian life – come and see!

The reasons may be justified, or it may be pure prejudice (or something in between), but it is common enough for people to regard certain places as ‘the pits’. This is Nathanael’s perception of Nazareth, but he is quickly proved wrong. Unexpected as it may seem to him, it is the home of the Messiah. It’s easy to allow ourselves to be blinded by stereotypes of places or people, and to miss the wonder and the beauty waiting to be discovered. We in the church can do it of other people and groups. Other groups and people do it of us – there is a lot of prejudice and cynicism against the church and the Christian faith and we can debate how justified that is.

Life can be very noisy. Sound surrounds us so much of the time. Even in silence there is often the constant chatter of our minds. The Gospel passage tells of Jesus deliberately creating opportunities for the disciples to come away from the noise – to listen to him, without distraction, so that their faith could begin to flourish. How can we create opportunities for one another to listen to God speaking to us?

Some adults may not enjoy the simple and often repetitive games and activities beloved by children, but they are great ways of bonding, of building relationships. In the contemporary activist adult world, prayer or spending time with God will be viewed by some as wasting time. Others will know that it is a great way of building relationships – with God and with each other.

Philip, called to follow Jesus, is eager to share his discovery with his friend. Nathanael is extremely sceptical. Put in a contemporary idiom, Philip doesn’t argue but simply says, ‘Come and hang out with Jesus for a while. Find out for yourself.’

Philip’s reply recalls Jesus’ invitation to the two disciples the previous day – ‘Come and see’ (1.39). The Greek word ‘see’ implies far more than ‘take a look’. To see is to understand.

For Nathanael, though, it is not seeing but hearing that overcomes his reluctance. In conversation with Jesus, he discovers that Jesus knows far more about him than he expected.

Both Philip and Nathanael, though very different, are part of God’s plan.

Whatever you are feeling, however you are reacting, you are part of God’s big plan. God doesn’t need one type of person, but all sorts of people with different emotions who can live and learn together. Will you come and see Jesus?

**Intercessions**

Come and see,
and join in praying for the people of the world waiting to hear good news.

Loving God, we pray for the states of America to be united in the days and weeks ahead.
We pray for an end to violence, for wisdom and protection for President-elect Joe Biden and all who will take office in a few days’ time. We pray for those threatening to disrupt the inauguration, and for the police force and those entrusted with keeping the law and peace.
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

We pray for those around the world at the mercy of extreme weather conditions.
We pray for the people of Japan, of Indonesia, especially those rescue workers who died trying to save others, for those bereaved in the plane crash, for those in our own country without power and heat. We pray for those tackling the climate change challenges of our time and for our own response in our day to day lives.
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

We pray for all who are pushed to their limits at work and at home, for Intensive Care Staff, for all in the emergency services, for GP's, teachers and school staff, for parents and students, for all whose mental health is at breaking point. We pray for our Government and all whose decisions affect millions of lives. And we pray for one another as we respond to the restrictions locally and nationally.
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

We pray for those whose businesses are closed, whose shops are locked up, whose rooms have no guests, for those whose money is running out, for those on the brink of despair.
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you.**

We pray for your church, entrusted with the good news of Jesus, and charged with serving all those in need. We pray for hospital chaplains, for those ministering to the bereaved, and for one another as we seek to share our faith and our hope in Jesus Christ.
**Lord, hear our prayer and draw us all closer to you. Amen.**

**Blessing**

Lord, what we have learned this day – help us remember.
Teach us to recognise your voice.
Teach us how to see you in our lives and encounters.
Help us to give others space so that they may hear you too.
**Amen.**

1. *Fiona Dorman taught English in secondary school for 20 years and is currently working as Bristol Cathedral education officer and as an educational consultant.* https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/111-january-february-2021-b/epiphany-2/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Graham Tomlin, Why Being Yourself is a Bad idea and other countercultural notions, SPCK 2021 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity, Cambridge, 1989 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)