

## **Background to the reading**

The text verse is <sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Who was this Nathanael? His name only appears in the Gospel of John.

According to the Gospel, he was from Cana in Galilee and he was brought by Philip to Jesus, sceptical about the possibility of a Messiah from Nazareth. He was astonished that Jesus knew him already, having seen him under the fig tree. He confessed that Jesus was Son of God and King of Israel. This was the confession of an 'Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit'. He was also one of those who saw Christ on his resurrection appearance by the Sea of Tiberias according to John chapter 21.

So what was wrong with Nazareth?

Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It was the home of Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:39), and here the angel announced to the Virgin the birth of the Messiah (1:26–28). Here Jesus grew up from his infancy to manhood (4:16); and here he began his public ministry in the synagogue (Matt. 13:54), at which the people were so offended that they sought to cast him down from the cliff whereon their city was built (Luke 4:29). Twice they expelled him from their borders (4:16–29; Matt. 13:54–58); and he finally retired from the city, where he did not do many mighty works because of their unbelief (Matt. 13:58), and took up his residence in Capernaum.

Nazareth is situated among the southern ridges of Lebanon, on the steep slope of a hill, about 14 miles from the Sea of Galilee and about 6 miles west from Mount Tabor.

It is supposed from the words of Nathanael in John 1:46 that the city of Nazareth was held in great disrepute, either because, it is said, the people of Galilee were a rude and less cultivated class, and were largely influenced by the Gentiles who mingled with them, or because of their lower type of moral and religious character. But there seems to be no sufficient reason for these suppositions. The Jews believed that, according to Micah 5:2, the birth of the Messiah would take place at Bethlehem, and nowhere else. Nathanael held the same opinion as his countrymen, and believed that the great "good" which they were all expecting could not come from Nazareth. This is probably what Nathanael meant. He was just saying what everyone else was thinking. It is clear that this Nathaniel, although we know nothing more about him, was an honest and sincere human being.

So what good could come from Nazareth? Well we all know the answer. Jesus is indeed what Nathanael confessed - our Saviour and Lord.

## **Sermon**

Our reading reveals a man by the name of Nathaniel who spoke the truth from his heart on two occasions.

Firstly, when Philip told him about the Jesus from Nazareth, he **said out loud** what everyone else was thinking.

Secondly, when Jesus told him that he already knew him while he was having a conversation with Philip; he confessed that Jesus was the Son of God.

And because he did not lie in the first instance or conceal his inner contempt about Nazareth - his confession meant so much more. It was not just words.

God surprised Nathaniel not only about Nazareth but also by being present through Jesus. Jesus knew Him already while he

was expressing his doubts and yes addressed his pessimism about Jesus being the Saviour.

Jesus saw that there was no conceit in him. He was a good and honest man with faith – “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

I also met such an Israelite on our holidays. But first I must add that I truly think God had a message for me.

Well, let me start telling you what happened. We have friends in Port Elizabeth who insisted that we use their old car and I mean really OLD! So we accepted their invitation. We had to drive to Hannalie (who stayed with us here in Scotland) on the Sunday about one hour's drive and then on the Monday another 3 hours to George where Nanda's godmother lives.

On our arrival at Port Elizabeth's airport we were notified that the key had broken and was stuck in the ignition of the OLD car. After three hours, a locksmith managed to fit a new ignition. We were excited. Finally we could start our journey. But on the way I said to Nanda something is not right with the car. Although it is automatic, it seemed as if the gears did not react automatically to the speed I was driving.

And then about 12 kilometers from a nearby town Humansdorp, I saw fumes of smoke coming from the exhaust and then started smelling it in the car. The car then just stopped in its tracks as I pulled off the motorway. I evacuated Nanda and the children and managed to get the attention of a passerby vehicle. The man and his extended family stopped and it soon became clear that he knew a lot about cars. This was, of course, the first miracle because South Africans do not generally stop to help others because they can fake it and rob you. But this man was so kind. He said there is no way that he will leave us next to this road as it was really dangerous and night was approaching fast. So he offered to tow us to the first town. He saw my doubts and suggested that his brother do the driving in the OLD car while he towed us. I agreed. In the car it transpired that they were Jews

and that his brother who was driving our borrowed broken car was visiting from Jerusalem!

After we arrived safely in the town and had a cuppa at a local service station, I said to Nanda that the man who helped us was truly an Israelite in whose heart there was no deceit!

God surprised me once again, even on my holiday. I picked this reading before I went on holiday and before I knew that I will be meeting a true Israelite. Secondly God knew that "our tree" was not safe and sent us help. He knew that we faced danger in a real way but provided in our needs. God was there. He is everywhere. He is in Nazareth, in Bethlehem, in Humansdorp, in Kirknewton, in East Calder, in Livingston – yes He is the Ever present God. He knows us like He knew Nathaniel. He knows our doubts. He knows our pain and struggles. He knows all about our families. He knows our worries. He knows whom we love and whom we despise. He knows our real friends and those who pretend to be our friends. He knows about all the times that we sit under our trees and doubt, moan, laugh, cry, and are hurting. He knows what is going on in our hearts.

And He is saying something so profound but so true to us all at the beginning of this new year – He is saying to all of us "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that in 2015"

He is inviting us all to come and follow Him. He is offering us all the "opperchancity" to have love, hope and faith in 2015. All that He requires is that you and I live lives of faith, hope and love, anchored securely in Him alone. All that He asks is that we will be honest with Him when we talk, when we walk with Him. All that He asks is that you and I obey Him and rely on Him alone.

If we do, we will be "surprised", moment by moment, by what God will and can do in our lives.

Let us all follow Him in 2015, wait on Him in 2015, and allow Him to "surprise us by His presence....Let us not second guess Him and allow Him to speak and rule our lives according to His will. And whenever He surprises us, let us all tell our stories of hope everywhere we go.

May all of you have a blessed and safe journey with Jesus in 2015!

Amen