

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Revd Alan F. Miller

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

The one who calls you together this day  
yearns for each of you and for all people to hear  
and be blessed.

**Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.**

Blessed is the One who comes bringing  
trustworthy words  
for the healing of the world.

**Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening.**

**Hymn** Thou art before me Lord, thou art behind

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

You invite us, O God, to live in your ways,  
and you give us to each other to know and to love  
as we journey in this life.

Show us your will for all creation.

Help us to listen to your urgings with prayerful hearts  
so that we may honor what you have made,

in the name of the holy Trinity, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

### **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.

Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O LORD, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

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.  
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,  
when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.

O that you would kill the wicked, O God,  
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—  
those who speak of you maliciously,  
and lift themselves up against you for evil!  
Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

### **CONFESSIOIN**

Assured that the One who calls us to hear and obey  
already knows the confessions of our hearts  
and is ready to forgive,  
let us confess our sin before God and before one another.

Holy God, you see into each of us  
and know us fully

as creatures in need of your constant care.  
We confess that we have neither heard your word  
nor followed your will.  
We have failed our nation, neighbors, families, friends,  
and ourselves.  
Give us ears to hear your wisdom.  
Lead us to honesty and faith  
so that we may begin again with renewed strength;  
in Jesus' name. Amen.

God knows the hearts of those who seek forgiveness,  
and by grace you have been saved.  
In Jesus' name you are forgiven.  
Your sins are no more.  
You have been made clean.  
God strengthens you with freedom  
through the Holy Spirit, in Christ Jesus.

## **John 1: 43-51**

### **Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael**

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

### **REFLECTION**

*By your Holy Spirit, O God, open our ears, our eyes,  
our hearts, and our minds to the Holy Word  
so that it comes to rule within us for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

When the Church of Scotland set out to think about reforming itself to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the words of Jesus 'Follow me' were chosen to express the intention for the church to become a body in which every member knew themselves called to faith, and called to the service of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. It is call to get up from where we are, and perhaps from where we have become settled, or even stuck; to listen to

the voice of Jesus that summons us to live and witness to the Good News; it is a call to move forward with God and to put our faith into action, using the gifts each of us has to offer.

Today's gospel story about Nathanael, speaks to us of the unexpected way in which God reveals himself at work in the world, and also the low threshold of our own expectations, which must be confounded again and again, to be raised higher than the limitations of our own world view, if we are to hear God calling us and be able to respond in faith to God's summons.

The season of Epiphany is all about the way in which God has been revealed - today we hear how Jesus was revealed to Nathanael as the longed-for Messiah and Saviour, confounding Nathanael's scepticism and cynicism. We reflect on his response to the revelation of God's presence - his willingness to trust in God, to hear God's call, to get up and to follow where God led.

Nathanael believe that the long-promised Messiah could possibly come from anywhere quite so obscure as Nazareth - what, can anything good come out of Nazareth? and he clearly expects the answer to be no, of course not - everyone knows that nothing good comes from there, and certainly not God's Messiah. At first Nathanael, like so many others sees Jesus only as a man, the son of Joseph, a carpenter; he needed the help of his friend Philip to understand the revelation of God in Jesus, and so to be able to recognise Jesus as for who he is, and see what God is doing, before he would get up and follow.

Nathanael was not ready to believe that God could work in the way he did - it went against all his expectations; in fact we could say that his expectations - his expectation of God and his expectation of himself - just weren't high enough; Nathanael needed to expect more of God, and more of Jesus, of himself, and of his friend, before he would come to understand that in Jesus he did indeed encounter God's presence, and could no longer deny the truth, nor refuse his calling.

This is a story about someone's expectations - and in reflecting on them, we are brought to consider what it is that we expect of God, and in turn, what God expects of us. It is clear from scripture, from the words of the prophets and of Jesus, from the history of Israel and of the early church, that God has high expectations, even if we often fail to live up to them. Knowing our frailty and our failings, God calls us to serve the world in Jesus' name as members of the Church.

I suspect, however, that like Nathanael, we do not always have the same high expectations either of God or of ourselves. There is a deeply ingrained trait particularly in the Scottish psyche that refuses to allow us to boast of our our abilities and our gifts - and that on the whole is a good thing because as followers of a God who in Christ gave his life for the salvation of the world, we have every reason to act with humility.

Nevertheless, that same God has given each one of us talents and capabilities to use in his service, each one different from the others, but all combining to work together as a whole. Our problem is that sometimes we just don't believe that we are fit and able to serve God. We find it hard to believe that we, I, or you personally might have been chosen by God to play an important part in God's mission in the world, to bring all creation and every creature

to newness and fullness of life. We don't expect that God can be ready to use us to do amazing things or that we might be up to the job. The truth is, our expectations are too low, and like Nathanael's, need to be confounded so that we can see how God works in the world, and be ready ourselves to play our part.

Nathanael, who starts out as a deeply unconvinced sceptic, is brought to deeper insight by Jesus' knowledge of him, against all his expectations, and comes to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God.

Too often, the church has the same problem as Nathanael, for the church consists of people like you and me. A church full of those so sure of themselves that their expectations can never be altered, and if those expectations are set low, then there is plenty of room for scepticism to colour the way we see the world, other people, and God. We may even get to the point where we no longer believe much of what we are told by anyone, and this is an increasing problem in an era when fake news is all too easily spread by lies and subterfuge. Like Nathanael we may come to prefer to sit back under our fig tree as detached onlookers, refusing to be drawn out; we may find it easy to ask "Can anything good come from our church? Can anything good come from our people? Can anything good come from God?"

It seems to me at times, that too many in the church at large seem to have stopped expecting anything much of God. As our numbers dwindle, our money run out, and we find ourselves marginalised in a society in which not so long ago the church, and Christianity, wielded great influence. With today's society shaped by the advance of secular and material values, it seems that the odds are stacked against us, and it might be only natural to be tempted to give up and to ask 'why bother? no-one's listening to us anyway' or 'what's the point – nothing we do makes any difference'.

But God calls people of all ages to be part of his work in the world –no matter who we are, God knows us and calls us into his service: and God waits for us to make our response to his call. And so often, that response is determined by our expectations, and by whether or not we have any hope for the future, or any faith left in a God who acts in the world.

Nathanael did not expect much but, God called and he ended up following – God expects his people to answer, to get up, and to follow, holding fast to our faith and trusting that what we do does make a difference; that new ways of doing things are always worth trying; and believing that new ventures in faith are always worth supporting – because then maybe, just maybe, we may find our expectations confounded by the discovery of what God can do through us.

### **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

Let us pray for all the earth, the church, and all those in need, saying,  
God of grace, hear our prayer.

Let us pray for the world:  
for leaders of nations,

that wisdom and integrity will prevail for the good of all people,  
especially the poor;  
for regions torn by conflict, that peace may reign  
and living become an enterprise of construction rather than destruction;  
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for all people of faith:  
for the unity of the body of Christ,  
that divisions might not turn people away from the church;  
for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews,  
that wherever prayers are raised up, the one God of all will hear;  
for all people who nurture life in the name of a greater good;  
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for our own nation:  
for the president and Congress, the Supreme Court and all judges,  
for state governments, city councils, school boards,  
and all who have power to make policy,  
that all consideration be given  
to what is most healthy for people and creatures;  
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for those in need:  
for all who are hungry in our nation and world,  
for those who have no home and no employment,  
for those who are either unjustly or justly imprisoned,  
for parents and children who live in fear for any reason,  
and for all who are in mourning;  
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

For all other concerns of this assembly now spoken aloud or silently, . . .  
God of grace, **hear our prayer.**

With thanksgiving,  
we remember all those who have shaped us in your ways, O God.  
Receive our prayers and grant whatever you see  
that your people need;  
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Hymn: Soldiers of Christ, arise

### **CHARGE**

All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial.  
Listen to the word of the Lord as you move through  
your days.

Trust that the Holy Spirit will guide your choices.  
See in each person you meet one for whom Jesus  
gave his life.

**BLESSING**

The peace of Christ, crucified and risen for all,  
go with you this day and always.