

### **Call To Worship: 'Reaching Down'**

Lord you reach down into our darkness,  
into the pits and the traps others make for us,  
into the mire and mess we make for ourselves,  
into the despair and disappointment of this difficult world.

You reach down and step into our darkness,  
making yourself small,  
making yourself like us.

Not distant, not holding back  
but walking every difficult mile  
every foot-wearing journey  
of this Emmaus life.

Every Calvary Road, every Valley of Shadow,  
you take the stones in our shoes  
and place them in yours.  
You limp beside us.

Quietly, silently, often in the guise of others,  
in the hands and feet, tears and smiles  
of friends and strangers,  
and in the profound name and caring presence of  
the Man of Sorrows,  
the Prince of Peace,  
the Son of Man:  
Jesus.

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### [John 1:43-51](#)

This simple story may make us nervous. Some of us find it difficult to share our faith. So to hear a story which makes the importance of faith-sharing clear and which makes it sound effortless for others may give rise to concern.

But as we make our way through John's narrative I hope to show you that this is actually quite an encouraging account of sharing Jesus with others.

**Chapter one** of the story is about *conversation*. Jesus' approach to Philip is conversational:

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, 'Follow me.'

The same could be said of Philip's approach to Nathanael:

<sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'

Take a moment to consider something about Philip and his background.

<sup>44</sup> Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

He is from up north, away from the sophisticated south around Jerusalem where all the movers and shakers lived. He and Andrew have Greek names, and given that parts of Galilee had been influenced by Greek culture you might say they have a less than entirely kosher background. Therefore, they are not likely to be fluent Jewish theologians, able to express the pure faith eloquently and defend it academically.

In other words, they are like many ordinary church members.

But what Philip (and Andrew) can do is talk simply and honestly with people about why Jesus is important to them. Philip has a simple faith, and he can tell Nathaniel that he believes Jesus is the fulfilment of all his hopes.

And that is something we can all do in ordinary conversation. It doesn't have to be forced. We don't have to steer the conversation. We are not all evangelists but we are all witnesses and we can say what Jesus means to us.

That might be quite significant at present. What if Christians were saying how their faith in Jesus has held them up through the coronavirus pandemic?

We don't know whether people will react positively or not, but we're not responsible for their reactions: they are. Our responsibility is to be a witness to Jesus and all he has done for us.

**Chapter two** of this story is about *cynicism*. Nathanael's initial response is indeed negative:

<sup>46</sup> 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Nathanael asked.

It's pretty disdainful, isn't it? Nathanael comes from a village nearby, namely Cana, and perhaps there was some rivalry. But Nazareth was certainly what we

might call a 'humble' place. In Surrey terms, Jesus' upbringing was more Sheerwater than Virginia Water.

What do we do when the response to our conversation about Jesus is this kind of cynicism? I can tend to get defensive or alternatively walk away when people get cynical with me, but Philip was a better man than I am. His reaction is simple (and perhaps quiet):

'Come and see,' said Philip.

He doesn't press Nathanael for a decision. He doesn't demand immediate acceptance. He knows if Nathanael is to follow Jesus he must embrace the decision for himself. 'Come and see.'

How can we say 'Come and see' to cynical friends today? The pandemic makes it particularly hard, because we can't invite someone to church or to a small group. But in the present circumstances we could point them to suitable videos online or to books.

And the sheer fact that we can simply say, 'Come and see' in a way that shows we don't feel threatened may be its own witness to what the peace of Christ in our hearts does for us.

**Chapter three** is about *encounter*.

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

<sup>48</sup> 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you.'

<sup>49</sup> Then Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.'

Cynical Nathanael has his world rocked.

Cliff Richard once covered a Christian song called 'Better than I know myself.' The chorus said, 'You know me better than I know myself.' This is what Nathanael discovers about Jesus, and it stuns him.

And Jesus knows him not only as cynical Nathanael, but as 'an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.' He sees not merely the sin but also the potential for goodness.

Effectively by saying that Nathanael has no deceit in him, Jesus is giving a big compliment: he is telling him that he is better than the founder of Israel, Jacob, who spent so much of his life deceiving family members. That's quite something to say to someone who has been sitting under a fig-tree – the usual posture for someone seriously studying the Jewish Law.<sup>1</sup>

St Augustine says that he was reading beneath a fig tree when he heard the call of Jesus to 'pick up and read' the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine had led a sexually dissolute life to the distress of his mother Monica, but the voice of Jesus changed everything. And although he remained imperfect and didn't resolve all his personal issues in this life, he became one of the greatest ever church leaders and Christian thinkers the world has seen.

We cannot manipulate people into the kingdom of God, and we shouldn't try. Our rôle is to tell people how Jesus has made a difference in our lives and to invite them to 'Come and see.' It's then up to Jesus to do the rest and for people to decide whether to respond. So we simply pray for him to reveal himself to the people with whom we have shared our faith.

**Chapter four**, the final chapter of this story, is about *revelation*.

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said, 'You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree. You will see greater things than that.'<sup>51</sup> He then added, 'Very truly I tell you, you will see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on" the Son of Man.'

You may remember that the comedians Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse created two characters called Smashie and Nicey. They were old, hammy disc jockeys, allegedly based on Dave Lee Travis and the late Alan Freeman. Every sketch finished with them playing the same record on the turntable – Bachman Turner Overdrive, 'You ain't seen nothing yet.'

Well, 'you ain't seen nothing yet' could be a summary of Jesus' response to Nathanael's confession of faith in him. Jesus this is bigger than just you and me. I have come to connect heaven and earth – hence the angels ascending and descending on him.

Mission is more than just the personal relationship between an individual and Jesus, important as that is. Mission connects us with the vast, eternal purposes of God to reconcile heaven and earth and to make all things new. When Jesus

calls someone to have faith in him, he calls them to play their part in those eternal plans.

Indeed for some, that is the appeal of the Gospel. While many may be drawn by the promise of sins forgiven, others connect with Jesus when they realise that he gives them a purpose in life that goes way beyond what an ordinary career can offer.

So one former acquaintance of mine has a global ministry of speaking and writing on creation care. His concern for the environment has spanned decades and it all goes back to a faith that believes in a God who wants to make all things new.

Another acquaintance found his career changing from being a professional theologian to one with a passion for adoption and fostering. He set up a charity and has recently handed over the leadership of it, because he has been appointed as a government adviser on adoption and fostering. Where did it all come from? A big picture of a God who wants to bring reconciliation and healing everywhere.

Now doesn't that make you wonder? What if we spoke more about what Jesus means to us? What if some people, even though cynical, were willing to be introduced? What might Jesus do in their lives? How might he use them for good as he brings together heaven and earth?

It all starts with an ordinary conversation.

### **A Liturgy For A Time Of Widespread Suffering**

Christ Our King,

Our world is overtaken by unexpected calamity, and by a host of attending fears, worries, and insecurities.

We witness suffering, confusion, and hardship multiplied around us, and we find ourselves swept up in these same anxieties and troubles, dismayed by so many uncertainties.

**Now we turn to you, O God,  
in this season of our common distress.**

Be merciful, O Christ, to those who suffer, to those who worry, to those who grieve, to those who are threatened or harmed in any way by this upheaval. Let your holy compassions be active throughout the world even now—tending the afflicted, comforting the brokenhearted, and bringing hope to many who are hopeless.

**Use even these hardships to woo our hearts nearer to you, O God.**

Indeed, O Father, may these days of disquiet become a catalyst for conviction and repentance, for the tendering of our affections, for the stirring of our sympathies, for the refining of our love.

**We are your people, who are called by you, We need not be troubled or alarmed.**

Indeed, O Lord, let us love now more fearlessly, remembering that you created us, and appointed us to live in these very places, in the midst of these unsettled times.

It is no surprise to you that we are here now, sharing in this turmoil along with the rest of our society, for you have called your children to live as salt and light among the nations, praying and laboring for the flourishing of the communities where we dwell, acting as agents of your forgiveness, salvation, healing, reconciliation, and hope, in the very midst of an often-troubled world.

And in these holy vocations you have not left us helpless, O Lord, because you have not left us at all. Your Spirit remains among us.

**Inhabit now your church, O Spirit of the Risen Christ.  
Unite and equip your people for the work before them.**

Father, empower your children to live as your children.  
In times of distress let us respond, not as those  
who would instinctively entrench for our own  
self-preservation, but rather as those who—in imitation  
of their Lord—would move in humble obedience toward  
the needs and hurts of their neighborhoods and communities.

You were not ashamed to share in our sufferings, Jesus.  
**Let us now be willing to share in yours, serving  
as your visible witnesses in this broken world.**

Hear now these words, you children of God,  
and be greatly encouraged:

The Lord's throne in heaven is yet occupied,  
his rule is eternal, and his good purposes  
on earth will be forever accomplished.  
So we need never be swayed by the brief and  
passing panics of this age.

**You are the King of the Ages, O Christ,  
and history is held in your Father's hands.**

We, your people, know the good and glorious  
end of this story. Our heavenly hope is secure.  
In this time of widespread suffering then,  
let us rest afresh in the surpassing peace of that  
vision, that your whole church on earth might be  
liberated to love more generously and sacrificially.

**Now labor in and through us, O Lord, extending and  
multiplying the many expressions of your mercy.  
Amen.**

*From Every Moment Holy: Death, Grief, and Hope*

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For more information about this liturgy, visit [www.everymomentholly.com](http://www.everymomentholly.com)

## **Blessing**

The God of life go with us,

the Risen Christ beside us,  
the vibrant Spirit within us.

**Amen.**<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A Burrige, *John: The People's Commentary*, p45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, citing *Confessions* 8:28-29.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Simpson, *His Complete Celtic Prayers*, #300.