

Sermon
18 January 2015
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Text: John 1:43-51

We had a lovely holiday in South Africa. We saw family and friends, and we spent lots of time outside. It was really warm. The sun shone every single day (not that I'm trying to make you jealous or anything!), and this morning it's almost surreal to think that we didn't wear socks or jumpers for the past 3 weeks!

But as with every holiday, there was bound to be a wee hiccup somewhere!

So one day we were driving on the motorway, when our car broke down.

The boys were sleeping on the back seat, but when the smoke that came from the engine started to fill the car inside, I panicked, woke them up at the speed of lightning and pulled them out of the car.

André and I looked at each other and didn't know what to do. It was a busy road, so it wasn't safe for us to be standing there (by the end of December they've already recorded 1,062 fatalities on the roads in South Africa for the Christmas holidays alone.)

But we also knew that we were an easy target for anybody who would want to steal money or even worse – you hear so many horror stories, and I was really scared.

André decided to try and get somebody to stop. Now I know this might sound strange to you, because in this country people will automatically stop if they see that somebody is in trouble next to the road, but South Africans just don't do that, because you never know if it is really somebody needing help, or a ploy to get you off the road and rob you or harm you... Like I said, it's not safe.

Luckily somebody pulled over. Another car, full of holiday makers – Jews, from Israel, visiting family in South Africa. The nicest, kindest people. They towed us into the next town, to a safe place, where we waited for friends who then came to pick us up. They didn't leave until they knew that we were safe.

I was so relieved, because it could have been anybody. One of them even took the wheel in our car, because André was a little shaky. We were so vulnerable; they could have taken us anywhere or done anything to us. But all they did was help. Save our lives, really.

Now all of you know André and his wee anecdotes. Always when we meet a good person, André calls him/her a “true Israelite,” someone with nothing false about them.

Which of course he also did when we met these kind people. So we laughed a little about this, because these people were not only “true

Israelites” in a metaphorical sense, they *literally* were Israelites!! Jews straight from Israel.

And can you believe it, when I opened my Bible to start preparing my sermon, and I read the text I chose ages ago and sent to Liz to print in the Order of Service before we went away on holiday, it was the exact same text where Jesus tells Nathanael that he is a “true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”

So I just knew that I had to tell you this story this morning!

God was looking out for us that day, by sending those people to us. And God surprised me. Because I was almost expecting the worse, I was sceptical and I didn't trust these people when I just saw them, but then they turned out to be amazing.

God is always looking out for all of us. He knows us very well, and he knows what we need - Whether we realise this or not.

God knew Nathanael too, long before Jesus crossed his path.

Jesus was busy calling disciples, people who could follow him and help him spread his message of love and salvation. He called Philip, and then Philip went on to tell Nathanael about Jesus.

But Nathanael was sceptical. When Philip told him that Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah they have been expecting, Nathanael snorted and said: “What? Jesus from *Nazareth*? Can anything good come from Nazareth?!”

Just like we will sometimes tease when someone comes from Fife: “Can anything good come from Fife? Certainly not!” The only difference is – Nathanael was dead serious. The messiah would come from Bethlehem, according to tradition, not from an ordinary wee place like Nazareth...

But Philip wasn't put off by Nathanael's attitude. He just said: “Come and see.”

And even before Philip could start explaining that Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem, Jesus saw them approaching and said to Nathanael: “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”

This really startled Nathanael. “How do you know me?” he asked Jesus. Jesus answered that he saw him while he was still under the fig tree, before Philip called him.

And this, the fact that Jesus *knew* him, that Jesus knew *what kind* of a person he was and *where* he was before even meeting him, brought Nathanael to faith. Meeting Jesus changed Nathanael from a sceptic into a believer.

To this Jesus replied: “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” In other words: “If you were impressed by the fact that I've known you before you knew me, stick around, and I'll show you how amazing your life can be with me in it...”

Jesus surprised Nathanael. And I can just imagine what a big turn Nathanael's life took after then – because he stayed with Jesus.

But you know, it shouldn't really surprise us that God knows us in and out, because he made us. He knows what's going on in our lives, in our heads, in our hearts. He knows where we are – physically, but also emotionally. And he tells us to follow him, to stay with him, if we want to see even greater things.

Nathanael did. And he saw lots of amazing things: he saw miracles; he saw people's lives changed completely. He saw Jesus hanging on the cross to save him, to save us all.

God knew that we were stuck alongside that road in South Africa; he knew that we were scared, and it shouldn't have surprised us that he sent a true Israelite to help us... Because he said that if we believe we shall see great things.

Stick around, follow Jesus, and you shall see great things too.

Somewhere unexpected, like in Nazareth or Fife, you might meet someone who will change your life.

At a *time* when you are sitting under your own fig tree of doubt or worries or depression, an old friend might come along and say: "Come and see" – and change the direction of your life completely.

It doesn't matter where you are – if you've decided to stick around with Jesus, he'll be there with you.

It was amazing to feel the hot sun shining down on us in South Africa, to see the hand of God in a giraffe elegantly crossing the road; to feel the

hand of God in the salty splash of the waves in my face on the beach; but it was equally amazing to look at the snowflakes falling gently down to the ground at 5 o'clock this morning; to experience the warmth of people saying "welcome home".

God is here, in the big things and the little things. In the happy times and the sad times, in the easy times and the difficult times.

God is in Bethlehem and in Nazareth, in South Africa and in Scotland, in West Lothian and in Fife. God is where we expect him and where we don't.

And he knows us. Whether we want to know him or not, he knows us.

So, like Philip said to Nathanael, I want to say to you this morning: "*Come and see.*" Be open to be surprised. Come into 2015 and see all the amazing things God is going to do for you this year.

If you stick around Jesus, you'll see greater things than you ever expected to see. And I can testify to that.

Amen