

Come and See

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 January, 2021

A Contemporary Reflection by Dr Byron Smith

Epiphany 2B

1 Samuel 3:1-20; Luke 2:22-40

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus, and thank you for welcoming me amongst you.

For the benefit of those I haven't met before, let me briefly introduce myself. I'm Byron Smith. My ancestors came to this continent from Scotland, England, Wales, Germany and Denmark. I was born on Ngunawal land, but have spent most of my life here on Eora country. Though we gather virtually on electronic servers that are physically located somewhere across the ocean on Turtle Island, each of us finds solid ground under our feet, and so let us be mindful of the places in which we find ourselves, the stories told by soil and rock, tree and grass, bird and beetle.

I'm here on ancient land, land cherished by Creator God, and which since time immemorial has been home to and cared for by the Gadigal people. This land was stolen with violence and lies. Yet in the grace of God may we walk towards truth and healing, however painful the path. I pay my respects to elders, past and present, and acknowledge any First Nations people among us in this gathering with my humble gratitude and solidarity.

In my daily life, I wear a few hats. My wife Jessica and I have two young kids and we seek to be active members of our local community here in Paddington, just down the road from Pitt St. We share our home with an inspiring Aboriginal Christian leader called Brooke Prentis. I'm assistant pastor here at Paddington Anglican, where Jess and I have both been serving for about seven years.

I'm an ecological ethicist, with a PhD in theological climate ethics, and I spend a good chunk of my time trying to help Christians and churches join the dots between following Christ and caring for our common home, exploring ecological discipleship and climate justice as an application of the good news of Jesus to our situation on a warming world. I'm a theological adviser and climate consultant for Common Grace, which is a movement for Jesus and justice, a movement of tens of thousands of Christians in these lands now called Australia from a wide diversity of theological traditions, all seeking the common good on a variety of issues of urgent and strategic importance.

I've been involved in a number of acts of creative nonviolent resistance, joining with other Christian leaders in using my body and voice to try to hinder the forces sending our future up in smoke. I host an occasional news review podcast called *The Good Dirt*. I love worms and bees, and I love the stories that bind us together, especially old stories that open up new possibilities, and new stories that ground us in ancient wisdom.

A Reflection by Dr Byron Smith, Assistant Pastor, St George's Anglican Church, Paddington NSW
Sunday 17 Jan 2021, Epiphany 2B

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We just heard an old story, a very old story, read to us a few moments ago from the first chapter of the fourth Gospel, attributed to John.

If I surveyed a hundred regular readers of Holy Scripture and asked them to nominate three passages from the Gospel of John that they find most memorable or influential, how many do you think might point to this one? I suspect the answer would be none. Or maybe one or two.

Yet this passage, and the one immediately preceding it where Jesus calls Andrew and Simon Peter, depict the start of Jesus' public ministry after his baptism. Here we meet his first followers, and as readers or hearers of this Gospel, we encounter Jesus' first words.

The first words of Jesus in each Gospel reveal a lot about the nature and purpose of the text. In Matthew, for instance, Jesus speaks of fulfilling all righteousness by submitting to John's baptism, emphasising Jesus' continuity with the tradition of Hebrew prophets. A big theme for Matthew.

In Mark, we hear Jesus preach: "*The time is fulfilled and the reign of God has drawn near, turn around and trust in the good news*", which sets up Mark's narrative as full of drama and conflict – with Jesus demanding stark loyalty.

Luke's first words from Jesus come from the boy in the Temple, questioning his parents, a foreshadowing of Luke's Jesus, who turns the established order upside down.

But in John, Jesus' first words are: "*What are you looking for?*". A question. In this Gospel, Jesus the teacher uses fewer parables and asks more questions. As readers or hearers, his queries are very often also directed at us.

What are we looking for?

When we come to church, when we open the scriptures, when we pray, when we come to Jesus, what are we looking for?

Because it is all too easy to find only that which we expect to find, to notice only those things which are already familiar, to look at Jesus and see ourselves mirrored back. Psychologists call this 'confirmation bias': the tendency to prejudge situations and people and project onto them our existing beliefs and values.

"*What are you looking for?*" Jesus says. Jesus' next words to Andrew and Simon are "*Come and see*". Come and see. Some things are only learned through direct experience. Jesus invites Andrew and Simon into relationship, into shared time, a common journey. They can only be Jesus' disciples, his students, if they are also his companions, his friends.

The receptivity of Andrew and Simon is one response to Jesus. And these two are soon joined by Philip, who is from the same town, and shares their enthusiasm. But soon, we discover a contrasting response in the cynicism of Nathanael. When told about Jesus by an excited Philip, Nathanael asks scornfully: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"

Nathanael's prejudice makes him willing to write off Jesus, purely on the basis of his background. Philip's response echoes that of Jesus a few verses earlier: "*Come and see*". Wisely Philip doesn't try to argue with Nathanael. He simply invites him into an encounter. Prejudice is not dismantled purely - or primarily - by rational argument, but by personal relationship.

What about us? Are we open to a genuine encounter with those very different to us? Who are we tempted to write off?

Just a couple of lines later Nathanael has completely changed his tune, acknowledging this teacher from Hicksville, Nowheresville, Nazareth as God's anointed, the Messiah, the Son of God. What caused the difference? It was no more or less than the discovery that Jesus knew him. Genuine encounter, the kind that can reshape our understanding, that can erode our prejudice, that can reconfigure our priorities, genuine encounter isn't just coming to know someone else through personal experience, but discovering that we are also known.

You are known. In the depth of your being, in the innermost secrets of your heart, in your darkest fears, in your hidden shame, in your most cherished desires. You are known by one who wants to be your companion, who does not reject you, who will not demand that you become anything other than yourself, your truest self. The Psalmist writes: "*You search me Lord, and know me. You read my inmost thoughts.*"

And this knowledge, the knowledge that we are known, and accepted, is the wonderful wide place of liberty in which we can then encounter others, without fear, without needing to project onto them a mirror of our own desires or anxieties, but simply with curiosity, with kindness, with courage. Accepted by our Creator, we don't need to squeeze others into our mould, nor do we need to fit theirs.

And that wide space of liberty, where curiosity, courage and kindness can grow, is going to be needed more than ever in the days ahead. For I've been speaking of an ancient story, where Nathanael met Jesus.

But many of us have been watching a very different story unfold on our screens these last couple of weeks.

And it's not over.

Eleven days ago, we saw scenes of chaos, bloodshed and destruction at the heart of the most powerful empire in history. Thousands of Trump supporters smashed their way into the US equivalent of Parliament, disrupted the normally routine constitutional process confirming the election results, and threatened the lives of elected lawmakers.

This was not a protest that simply got out of hand. It was not merely another riot in a nation that has seen a lot of them in recent months.

This was a coup attempt. President Trump, who decisively lost the vote in November and whose term ends in just a couple of days, has spent weeks using lies and now inciting violence to attempt to stay in power. He has never conceded. Indeed, he has for years indicated that he only see elections as valid if he wins.

This is not over.

As more information has emerged about those involved in the attempted coup, the collusion of people inside Congress has become increasingly apparent, as well as the participation of more than a few police officers. The large crowds that sought to reinstall Trump against the wishes of the majority included far right paramilitary groups, white supremacists and members of the police and military.

This crisis didn't happen overnight. It didn't come out of nowhere. The roots of this burgeoning authoritarianism are deeper than just one man. Even if the next few days pass without further significant violence – and at this point, that's a big if – even if they do, the forces that led to last week's attempted coup are not going to just go away.

There may well be many dark days ahead. And that's before we join the dots to rising inequality, renewed geopolitical conflict or the rapidly declining habitability of our common planetary home.

Now why would I risk the likely misunderstandings that come whenever we venture into the fraught talk of politics? Why would I spend our precious time together talking about disputes in a far off land?

Because the forces swirling on the steps of the US Capitol are not confined to the other side of an ocean. Global empires don't undergo upheavals in isolation. Those winds increasingly blow here too.

Our acting Prime Minister this week repeated a slogan beloved of white supremacists, sought once again to dismiss and discredit ongoing efforts here and overseas to address structural racism in policing, and joined the PM in refusing to criticise Donald Trump for his role in stoking that deadly insurrection, in which largely white Christian nationalists attempted to overturn an election result by throwing out millions of votes, particularly from voters of colour.

This is a government, here on our land, that dismissed out of hand the consensus of the largest gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders in history, that boasts of locking up people convicted of no crime in cruel and inhumane conditions in order to send a message to others, and that refuses to pull its weight in a climate crisis that is already hitting the poorest hardest.

My point here is not a partisan one. I could easily enumerate many ways that the other major party, both here and in the US, also contributes to a system that is yet to truly wrestle with the violence in our colonial past, the rising inequality of the present, or to do much to mitigate or prepare for the catastrophes of the increasingly chaotic climate of the future.

Nor am I arguing for some kind of tepid middle ground in which good intentions and talk of coming together in unity papers over the real and deep divisions all around us. Too many of us, especially those of us in positions of privilege, like me, too many of us try to reduce the task of dismantling structural injustices to merely overcoming personal biases. That is not the lesson of Nathanael for us today. Recognising our ingrained personal prejudices is just one baby step in a far larger collective task.

But, when we are tempted to throw up our hands and say "*it's all too much, what can any one individual possibly do?*", that is when we need to come and see.

To come and see the Jesus who knows us, who loves us, who calls us to become ever more ourselves, who puts us in that broad space of freedom, where we can face whatever dark days lie ahead with curiosity, kindness and courage.