

## **To know him and make him known... among the seculars. CIU 2017, BVBC 2019**

### **A) Reading John 1.43-46**

*43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 Nathaniel said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."*

I really like this gentleman, Nathaniel. Soooo French, so obnoxious!

Now, there are a lot of obnoxious people out there. Including all the Nathaniel's of this world who are just not ready to hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ without a proper fight. Friends, welcome to the secular age. What is the secular age? It is the age of unbelief. Not that people seize to believe in God. You are here this morning, welcome! No, the secular age means that the default mode of belief is unbelief, especially here in the North East of the United States, and especially there, in Europe where I serve with my family. Just yesterday, flying

through London, I was seated next to an IBM French engineer. When I asked her what she was doing for living, she said: “I am an evangelist for IBM”. “A WHAT?” Age of unbelief... An evangelist for IBM, selling their top products in Artificial Intelligence. “Brilliant, I said. I am an evangelist too! For the Church of Jesus!” “A WHAT?”

I love the person of Nathaniel in Scriptures because he embodies for me the 3 marks of the secular man, like this French IBM engineer. See if, through his persona, you don't recognize some of your colleagues, class-mates or even perhaps, some of your family members...

## **1. Individualism**

First episode, it all starts with Nathaniel, sitting under a fig tree, watching the world, ALONE. What is he thinking about? We don't know, the text doesn't say. Maybe he is wrestling with some of life's deepest questions like: why am I here? Where do I come from? What shall we eat for lunch? Did my wife really lock the house this morning before getting into the car? I mean, real, deep existential questions.

Nathaniel is developing a worldview of his own. You might ask: what is a worldview? Well, it is a view of the world. Thank you. Aren't you glad you came this morning?

A worldview is a view of the world, taken from what you can see through your own eyes. It is an attempt to define reality, using yourself as the starting point. **First mark of the secular man: individualism.** It all starts with me and what I can see. What I see is real, what I don't see is NOT real.

What do you see this morning? Do you see the heavens opened, and the angels worshipping the LORD with us? Just because you don't see them doesn't mean it is not real.

## **2. Cynicism**

Then comes Philip... Philip. You know who I am talking about. You are home, thinking deep existential questions watching your favorite sitcom on your sofa, and then the telephone rings, and it's Mr Oh-my-goodness-you-will-never-believe-what-happened! The guy is tripping over his words, sooo excited and he wants to say. So he talks talks talks talks. And you

get bored bored bored. Here we go, that's Philip in case you couldn't visualize it.

- Nathaniel, we found the Messiah, the one that Moses announced. The one we are to listen to. He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!
- Nazareth? Seriously? What good can come out of Nazareth? Are you kidding me?

It's as if someone came to you and said: Hey, I have met God and he lives in Dover DE. Dover? Really? Are you kidding me?

See, the modern man is cynical. What is cynicism? It is more than skepticism. For the skeptic doesn't know if it is true or not. The cynic knows that it cannot be true. Because he doesn't want it to be true. **Second mark of the secular man: cynicism.**

Are you cynic? Have you decided what you will believe and what you will not believe, not based on truth but what you wish were true? What you really want to be true?

Are you worshiping him this morning, with the angels? Do you see the heavens opened?

### 3. Pragmatism

So here is the situation: you're at home relaxing on your sofa watching TV, Mr Philip who is super excited calls. He wants you to check it out. So what do you do? You get off the sofa and go check it out. Because that's the only way to get Philip off your back!

Besides, you think for yourself: Unless I can see it and experience it for myself, I just won't believe it. You think that's fair, isn't it?

See the secular man requires experience to validate knowledge. If he doesn't see it and experience it, he just won't believe it.

A little bit like Thomas, the other disciple: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will *never* believe."

**Third mark of the secular man: pragmatism.** He must see it, he must feel it, he must experience it. Otherwise he will *never* believe it.

How much do you still need to experience before you can believe? You hear a lot of truths from the

Bible, week after week, and in your mind, you think: I just don't know.

And there are all these Philips around you, some in your youth group, and they just aggravate you. I really wish I could believe, but... I just can't. I haven't seen it for myself. Listen, Faith is a gift. But is not the gift of stupidity. You don't need to believe in things that are not true. Only crazy people do that. No, God is not afraid of your questions my friend. Keep on searching. But watch out for cynicism. *True* inquiry is always *genuine* inquiry.

So here you have it. The 3 marks of the secular man: individualism, cynicism and pragmatism.

Individualism: unless I see it, Cynicism: unless I want it, Pragmatism: unless I experience it, I won't believe it. Period.

Does this sound familiar? Can you picture now the Nathaniels in your life? And you ask yourself: how in the world will this person ever encounter Jesus? Poor Philip, poor me! The City on the Hill wants to hide!

Fortunately, the story doesn't stop there! Listen to the next episode.

## **B) Reading John 1.47-51**

*47 Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathaniel said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." 49 Nathaniel answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." 51 And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

### **1. I see you!**

Jesus said to Nathaniel: "Before Philip called you, I saw you!"

What? Are you saying that I was not ALONE under my tree? Awkward...

Nathaniel, Nathaniel. You believe that the world is limited to what you can see. But from where I

stand, I see you, I have always seen you! Now is time for you to come and see me!

I remember, Patrick. A fellow engineer when I was working at the Michelin plant while doing my studies in seminary. Patrick is French. Obnoxious. One day, at a dinner party, he said very loudly so that everybody could hear: God doesn't exist. That's just make-believe, a fairy tale for crazy people.

I looked at him and said: Maybe you don't see him from where you are seated. I invite you to have a better look. We studied the Scriptures together for a whole year. I answered all his questions. At the end, he said: I know that the problem is not with God. It is with me. I just don't want to see him. Sad but true.

## **2. I want you**

Jesus said to Nathaniel: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"

What? Are you saying that not only you saw me, but you also know me? Bizarre!

Yes! Nathaniel, I see you and I know you. There is nothing of your life that is hidden from me. I

know your story, inside and out. I know your name and everything that comes with it. The bad and the good.

See the love of Jesus? He could have said: Here is the most obnoxious French guy in Israel. No. He affirms Nathaniel while pointing at his limitedness.

Nathaniel, you think you know. But you don't. That's the core of human sin: thinking that you know good from evil. But you don't. That's a lie. You don't know anything. You don't know right from left. He knows, you don't. The question is: will you confess your sin? Will you admit that you don't know?

Jesus is gently pulling Nathaniel out of his hiding place. Come and see!

The closer you get to Jesus, the more you realize that you are a sinner. Even more of a sinner that you would be willing to confess. But at the same time, in the same moment, you realize that you are loved. Even more loved than you ever dreamed you could be. Both are true at the same time.

I remember, Richard, a young intern at Michelin. Bright mind, Harvard graduate, mechanical engineer. We talked a lot about God. Lots of questions. And one day it just dawned on me. There was enough evidence out there to believe. He just didn't want to admit that he didn't know. Tough cookie. So I looked at him and said: Richard, you are way more intelligent than I am. I just have one question for you. Why are so scared to be loved? You know that God sees you and knows you. Why do you resist his love?

Listen, how many people can see right through you and still love you despite all the brokenness and junk that is in your heart?

Only one: Jesus of Nazareth. Hard but true!

### **3. I call you**

Jesus said to Nathaniel: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' you believe? You will see greater things than these!"

What? Are you saying that there is more to life than what I think there is? I mean more than just watching Netflix series on my sofa? Crazy!

Absolutely. You haven't seen anything yet my friend.

I see you, I know you and I call you to follow me!

See how beautiful Jesus is? How he is reaching out to Nathaniel? Jesus is calling Nathaniel to conversion: from death to life. From sofa to sola. Sola fidei, sola gracia, sola Christo! Rabbi, son of God, King of Israel!

This is the Gospel we proclaim: that true life is following Jesus in his death and in his resurrection. Death to self, life in him, for him, to him.

Jesus calls Nathaniel to die to his own desires, to his own dreams, to his own visions. For unless the grain falls into the ground, it cannot bear much fruit.

I remember Helen. The first time I saw her, she was hiding behind her hair, her bangs covering her eyes. She was born with a hearing disability. She thought: maybe God can heal me. We met, we read Scriptures, she encountered Jesus who called her to come and die. Die to her dream to hear well again. But she responded. Today, she is

reaching out and discipling people with hearing disabilities. She is seeing greater things indeed!

Have you died my friend? Have you died to your dreams? If you haven't died, you won't see greater things. Jesus calls you to come and die. So that you may live. Not your life, but His life through you.

Have you responded this morning? Are you worshiping him now, with the angels? Do you see heaven opened?

## **Conclusion**

Our world is full of Nathaniel's. And sometimes we think: boy they are not a gift from God. Watch him, watch Jesus turn their lives upside down so that they may become who they were truly meant to be: a gift to God. A gift for God. A gift from God. In fact, that is the very meaning of Nathaniel's name in Hebrew is "Gift from God" Don't give up. God is still in control!

**To the individualist who says:** unless I see it, to the cynic who says: unless I want it, to the pragmatist who says: unless I experience it, Jesus says: I see you, I want you and I call you! Come,

see and follow me! Jesus is the answer to the secular man's deepest questions!

## **Response**

We listened to the Word of God, now we need to respond to the Word of God.

This morning, there are three possibilities. Maybe you are like Philip, you are full on with your faith, and want the whole world to know about it. You want to shine like a city on the hill. Don't give up, continue to share the greatest story of all time, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Like the Philip we read about this morning, don't take it personally if people give you a push back. It's normal.

Remember that the default mode of belief today is unbelief. You are the weirdo, not them! Thank you for your love for Jesus and your passion to make him known. Keep up the good work.

Second possibility, you are the anti-thesis of Philip and you can only wish this sermon were over. Faith is not for you, at least not for now. You respect the Philips around you, but it is not your thing. Can I say something to you? Thank you for coming this morning. Really. Thank you. I have seen so many husbands dragged by their

wives to church service Sunday after Sunday in the hope they would convert. And you do it because you love her. Thank you! But can I make one request? That you would be patient just a little longer? Because I would now like to address a third group in our midst.

Maybe this morning you identify with Nathanael. You know that Jesus sees you, Jesus knows you, and calls you to follow him. You know that it is time to respond to his call.

You may still have many questions. You tend to be skeptical, borderline cynical and the fact that you grew up in a Christian family doesn't change the matter. It's often more difficult to find your own voice when for so long you have been told he is the only voice. I understand.

Lesslie Newbigin, a great thinker once said:

... skepticism is not the active principle in the advance of knowledge. The active principle is the willingness to go out beyond what is certain, to listen to what is not yet clear, to search for what is hardly visible, to venture the affirmation which may prove to be wrong, but which may also prove to be

the starting-point for new conquests of the mind. In the traditional language of Christianity, the name for that active principle is faith. (1996, 84)

See, Nathanael listened to what was not yet clear, searched for what was hardly visible, ventured the affirmation which could prove to be wrong. And yet it proved to be the starting-point for new conquests. Jesus saw him, wanted him and called him to greater things, greater conquests. It is time my friend, time to let him lead your life. If this morning, as Nathanael, you wish to come and follow him, I want to offer a prayer for you. A prayer that you can make yours by repeating after me.

### **Prayer of confession**

Jesus, I thank you because you see me. You know all my life, the good and the ugly. Yet you continue to call me. Strange. Strange to be loved despite my deepest flaws. Strange to be loved in spite of myself. Thank you for not giving up on me.

I confess this morning: I don't know you and I have often resisted you. I am sorry for my sins.

Please forgive me. Thank you for the cross where you died the death for my sins. Thank you for the empty tomb because I can now walk freely from sin, in faith, hope and love. I desire now to follow you, all of my days. Here I am, take me.

If your desire is to follow Jesus where you are, simply lift up your hand, as if you were saying to Jesus, here I am, take me.

Amen.

## **Thanks and Announcements**

Thank you friends!

**And if you want to know more about how to engage the secular mind**, be sure to join the conversation next week during SS hour.

God bless you and see you next week!