

**EPIPHANY 2**  
**14/1/24**  
**CAVES BEACH**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

You are here for us, O God;

**you give us security in an uncertain world.**

You encourage us to sing new songs;

**you joyfully set our worship free.**

You calling us as we go on the journey of life;

**it is your gracious way the leads to fulfilment.**

There is no end to the love you lavish on us;

**we know your love is there for us, in time and beyond time.**

**OPENING PRAYER**

Our happiness comes through trusting God;

**God enables us to put life's lessons into practice.**

Our peacefulness comes through trusting God;

**God gives us calm in the midst of life's storms.**

Our courage comes through trusting God;

**with faith in God, we know a confidence that cannot fail.**

Our community grows through trusting God;

**God is present in every welcome and is known as friendship grows and deepens. Amen**

**HYMN** TiS 147 To God Be the Glory

<https://youtu.be/3vbGFupxwu0>

**PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION**

We thank you O God, for your love towards us, such generosity is hard for us to take it in.

You formed us, inside and out, you see every part of us.

Before we speak, you know what we're going to say.

Before we act, you know what we're going to do.

Nothing is mysterious to you about us.

And yet still you love us in our brokenness and wrap us up in grace and delight.

We praise you and thank you for loving us so very much.

O God, we are sorry that we forget so often that you are present in our everyday lives,

We forget to be attentive to your call; we forget to listen to what your word says to us.

Sometimes we are tempted to believe that you are hard to find and are not close to us.

Sometimes we do not discern when you are speaking to us as others share your wisdom.

We pray that you will forgive us when we do not listen to you voice spoken through your word;

when we do not heed and act upon your call; when we do not share your insights out to our community.

Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE**

Our marvellous creator promises forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith.

St John writes: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."(1 John 1:9)

Hear then Christ's word of grace to us: Your sins are forgiven.

**Thanks be to God. Amen**

## READINGS

\* Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18

- <sup>1</sup>O LORD, you have searched me and known me.  
<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O LORD, you know it completely.  
<sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.  
<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- <sup>13</sup>For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
<sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
<sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
<sup>16</sup>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.  
<sup>17</sup>How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
<sup>18</sup>I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end<sup>[a]</sup>—I am still with you.

\* John 1: 43-51

<sup>43</sup>The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' <sup>44</sup>Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup>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.' <sup>46</sup>Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' <sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' <sup>48</sup>Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' <sup>49</sup>Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' <sup>50</sup>Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' <sup>51</sup>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.'

**HYMN** TiS 589 Jesus Calls! O'er the Tumult

<https://youtu.be/sSM2bW0v-tw>

## SERMON

There are some passages in scripture that I can never work out. You can look up all the commentaries and still get nowhere. It is a bit like trying to understand jokes from another culture to your own. I've heard it said that you don't understand, you don't grasp, another culture until you are able to understand their humour. I found the jokes that were told at lunch time at Synod meetings in Papua often went over my head. Everybody would be splitting their sides - except me! You can ask me some of their jokes over morning tea if you like, to see how you react!

Now, the passage this morning from John's gospel is one of these that I'm talking about. How many of us have studied that passage - either by yourselves, or in a Bible Study group - and reckon you've really understood it? What Jesus is saying sounds a bit like he's joking with this fellow called Nathaniel, doesn't it? It sounds like banter. Sounds like it, but is it?

There's another question I want to ask too, and that is, what has this passage got to do with the season of Epiphany? We looked at this last Sunday: "an epiphany is a revealing, appearing or manifestation of something or someone, and in this season the church reflects on the manifestation of Christ to all people."

So then, could we ask is this banter? - this conversation that sounds a bit like Jesus is joking around. Or on the other hand, is it serious? And if so, does this then, have anything to do with the revealing, the manifestation, the epiphany of Jesus - bringing us to an understanding of who he really is? The Christ - the Son of God?

Let me just put this passage in context for you. Just as our passage came from the first chapter of Mark's Gospel last week, so this one today comes from the first chapter of John's Gospel. So, we are right at the start of what these gospel writers want to tell us about Jesus. They want us to grasp quickly and definitely the importance of their narrative. Remember, they are writing well after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and they are looking back and realising that right from when they first met Jesus there was important information that he was disclosing about himself. There's the baptism where we are told of the voice from heaven which was God's affirmation of his Son. And now we have this weird banter between Nathaniel and Jesus - well, it seems pretty weird initially at least.

So what I'm asking is, is what we have here, Jesus actually disclosing now who he is? Remember, already he has been baptised when the Holy Spirit came upon him. And now he is going about getting a small band of followers who will be with him as he brings about the declaration of the coming of God's kingdom. Just prior to our passage this morning, John tells us that Andrew and his brother Peter, have come on board. Then today we are told the Philip joined them. And Philip gets excited. Nathaniel is sitting down minding his own business when Philip runs up shouting that he has found the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about, "And he's from Nazareth of all places!"

"Nazareth?" Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip simply invites him, "Well, come and see for yourself!" So, Nathanael follows, and before he can shake hands with this stranger from the backwaters of first-century Palestine, Jesus raises his arms and exclaims, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Or, perhaps to put it more colloquially, "There's a real Israelite, not a false bone in his body." Doesn't that seem an odd thing to say? Is it flattery or what? The point is that Jesus takes one look at Nathanael and knows him, so Nathanael replies with his question, "How do you know me?" Or maybe it was something like, "Where did you get that idea? You don't know me!" But that's just it, isn't it, Jesus did know him, just like he knows us, through and through. Did you hear those words from Psalm 139 this morning? "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 are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.”

But listen to what happens next. To Nathanael’s query, “How do you know me?” Jesus responds, “I saw you under the fig tree even before Philip told you about me.” What on earth has sitting under a fig tree got to do with the price of eggs, we may well ask!” And then listen to what Nathanael says next, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

This seems to be serious stuff, doesn’t it, and if so, what’s it all about? Why does John record it? How come Nathanael in one moment shifts from scepticism regarding someone from that little town of Nazareth, to being ready for the adventure of following him. What is it that makes him change his mind so dramatically?

Well, let’s take note that the fig tree was a common metaphor used for the religious institution of Jesus’ time. We find that it’s used in both Matthew and Mark’s gospels. Like the fig tree I’ve got in my backyard, fig trees are supposed to produce fruit right along with the leaves at more or less the same time. But in the gospels, we find that when Jesus goes to pick the fruit, he only finds the tree chock-a-block full of leaves - there is no fruit whatsoever. Whatever pollination is necessary for fruit to be produced, that just does not happen.

And so it is that Jesus uses this metaphor for the religious institutions of his day - all of the bells and whistles were there, but the fruit was not. Nathanael was one who knew that the fig tree he was under, the religious system over him in other words, needed some definite pruning, and in just a few words, Jesus seemed to promise to help with such an endeavour. You’ve heard the American phrase, “Drain the swamp” - that’s the sort of metaphor we are talking about - although it is nothing to do with Trump and his antics, I assure you!

So right at the beginning here in John’s gospel, we hear that Jesus is about to do something big about the current temple worship, the religious priests, the whole belief system had become completely askew from the truth about God who loves us. Jesus already knew there was a huge task ahead of him. Does he know already that it will lead to his crucifixion, his murder? He needs a group with him who are willing to take on this journey, carry this load, with him. They will need to be brave and courageous. And Jesus sees, knows, that Nathaniel has it in him to be one of his disciples.

Jesus then asks him, “Look, do you believe who I am just because I said that I saw you under a fig tree?” And he goes on to say, “You will see greater things than these .... you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Was that just some fantastic image or what? This morning, if I’d given you some pencils and paper I wonder what your drawing would look like? Angels of God, ascending and descending upon the Son of Man - can you imagine it even? The point is, it is a bit like the metaphor of the fig tree in that it actually alludes to something else: not the religious institution of the day, but this time to something in the Old Testament that Nathanael would certainly have recalled. What is it? Yes, Jacob’s ladder! In Genesis 28:12 we read that Jacob lay down his head on a stone out in the desert, after he’d had a wrestling match with God, and then he had a dream. And that dream was about a ladder that reached up to heaven with God at the top, and on that ladder, there were angels ascending and descending between earth and heaven, heaven and earth.

Knowing that story of Jacob, Nathanael would have understood Jesus to be saying that he would be the one to reestablish the joyful relationship between the people on earth and God in heaven. Jesus would not do away with the law, but would fulfill it. Jesus would make it so that no

person or institution could ever get in the way, of stopping, God bringing about reconciliation throughout creation.

And so, in the gospel narrative today, we have this rather unusual encounter that at first doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. But doesn't this passage, this conversation that sounds like banter, reveal who Jesus is? I believe we have heard it does! Unlike the religious teaching of the day, he will teach the truth about God. "I am the way, the truth, and the life". He will teach that God is love. And by his life and death on the cross he will bring reconciliation to all creation - the relationship between God and humankind, all of us, indeed all of creation, is restored, renewed as in the beginning it was meant to be. Yes, this is a passage that truly reflects the manifestation of Christ - it is epiphany to the core.

Jesus call to Nathanael may seem to us, on first glance to be somewhat unusual, but as it turned out, our Lord was inviting him on a journey that would take Nathanael all around the region with him, and eventually right up to Jerusalem to encounter the powers of the day. That saying yes to Jesus' call turned out to be very significant. And that's the same for us, isn't it? We don't get much information about what the "yes" will lead to! I tell you, I certainly didn't!

Jesus knew Nathanael, and likewise knows each of us. Lord, you have searched me and known me, says the Psalmist. God is acquainted with all my ways. We are creatures of God's own making. We cannot hide, we cannot pretend, because we are already known. My body was not hidden from you, says the psalmist. Even though he knows all about us, even though he therefore already knows all our shortcomings, that's completely O.K. - God's not concerned about them. He calls us even though he knows us so well - dare we think it: because he know us so well! All we need to do is be thankful. Even though we may be getting old and grey with more aches and pains every year, surely we can still say with the Psalmist, "I will thank you because I am marvellously made." Look, can I suggest that you get your Bibles tonight before you go to sleep, and read Psalm 139 and make it your prayer? Near the end are those wonderful words, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.....lead me in the way everlasting."

All Jesus wants us to do is say yes to following him. There won't be any hour by hour itinerary, but there is promise of hope and joy, because we are on a journey with him, helping him to usher in His kingdom - a kingdom of peace, and love in action. It's a different way of living to what the world lives, one that can be costly, but one that brings our thoughts and actions in line with God's will. We all know that we are living in dark times with many parts of the world in the midst of despair, hatred, violence and abuse. Jesus teaches a different way - a way of hope, of peace, of reconciliation through forgiveness of sins. And that way, the way of the cross - that is your baptismal calling - and mine. Amen

**HYMN** TiS 87 You are before me, Lord. (Sung to tune Anima Christi TiS 502)

<https://youtu.be/HjKF4t1TPkk>

### **PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING**

God of love, receive what we have given today.

We pray this gift of money will be used wisely for the growth of your kingdom.

As we bring this gift, we also offer our lives to your service.

We pray your blessing upon these gifts, and upon us all. Amen

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

As we come before God in prayer this morning, I'm very aware that as I mentioned just a few minutes ago, we all know that we are living in dark times with many parts of the world in the midst of great difficulties. Praying is not about telling God what is going on - he already well and truly knows. Prayer is about being in the presence of God and acknowledging our own powerlessness while putting our faith in God to bring about change for the common good, and us being willing to be his hands and feet in that endeavour, or process. That would be one way of thinking about intercessory prayer, or prayer for others. So now, let us pray:

Loving God, we bring before you the horrific and escalating situation occurring in the Middle East. We pray that due process at the International Court of Justice may be a catalyst for change, so that human rights and the sanctity of life are respected and upheld for all involved. We pray for respect for international law, and for the laying down of arms so that a path to peace may be found.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, in Jesus you teach us that we need to be vigilant, and willing to solve problems through dialogue, and yet the world's countries trade weapons, and missiles and bombs and all kind of arms. Production and sales of these instruments of death are on the rise. Lord, may we realise that violence begets violence, and suffering, and generational trauma. So Lord, we pray that the whole world may stop and see where there is greed instead of compassion, so that those making profit from other's suffering may realise their sin - realise that Your way is the only way for life.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we pray for those across the globe coping with natural disasters of one kind or another, whether it be earthquake, flood, drought, cyclone. We give thanks for those who work to save lives and property, and for those who are provide ongoing care for those affected. We pray for wisdom for government leaders as they legislate to lessen climate change and that we ourselves may prioritise care for how we use the resources you provide for our wellbeing.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we thank you for making yourself known to us and showing us the way of salvation through faith in Jesus. Our world so needs to know your peace and love. Be with all Christian people everywhere, and especially those who live in countries facing the terrible atrocities of war at the present time. We pray particularly too, for Christians in the Holy Land, that they may have courage to share your love with others and so be peacemakers in their communities.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we commend to you all whom we know personally who are especially in need of your care at this time. We thank you for your fatherly goodness, for your blessings of healing mercies, and comfort to all who are in need, sickness, or have anxiety, worries, or any other kind of distress. *(We'll take some time in quietness now to bring our loved ones to mind and mention their names.)* God of compassion, we pray for relief according to their needs, for patience in suffering and deliverance from their distress. And for us all, we pray for your peace in our hearts.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We thank God that we can come with these our requests, leave them in His hands, and draw our minds together as one, as we sing the prayer Jesus taught us,

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours  
now and for ever. Amen.

**HYMN** TiS 624 Christ be my Leader by Night as by Day

<https://youtu.be/UMUtRY3cuKw>

### **BENEDICTION**

Our God dwells among us and within us,  
and His Love goes with us.

Allow God's love to give you a genuine care for people.

Speak words of affirmation and blessing over others.

May God's light be your guide,

Christ's call be your inspiration,

and the Spirit's presence be your refreshment.

And may the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be among you and remain with you always. Amen