

Come and See

John 1: 43-51

One of the best films I watched this Christmas, one that's been repeated many times before, was *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. For those who haven't seen it, a group of British retirees travel to India to take up residence in what they believe is a newly restored hotel. Less luxurious than advertised, the Marigold Hotel slowly begins to charm in unexpected ways. It has a great cast – with household names such as Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, Bill Nighy, Penelope Wilton and Celia Imrie making up the group. But it's Maggie Smith's character, Muriel Donnelly, that I find the most interesting. A former housekeeper, she arrives in Jaipur for a cheaper hip operation and then convalesces at the Exotic Marigold Hotel. There's little that Muriel likes about India, but what she likes least is the food. On the journey to the hotel she's offered something to eat which Bill Nighy's character describes as 'aloo ka paratha'. With her acid tongue, Muriel replies, *'If I can't pronounce it, I don't want to eat it.'*

Her refusal to eat the dishes lovingly made and brought to her each day as she recovers from surgery reflect her stubborn refusal to experience anything new. Her character, I think, expresses well the natural human suspicion we have of things we don't know. Rather than try something new, many of us instinctively believe that we won't like it, so reject it out of hand, even if, in reality, it could do us some good. Faced with something new, we find ourselves saying *'I don't like it,'* before even asking *'what is it?'*

Nathanael's response to Philip in John 1:46 – *'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?'* – falls very close to this kind of saying. Nathanael knows it to be a self-evident truth that nothing and no one good comes from Nazareth. It's interesting to ask why he might think that. What was so bad about Nazareth? Nathanael's saying trips off his lips, a little like Muriel's in the film; this is no new prejudice but a well ingrained one. The problem is that it's hard for those of us who know nothing of the basis of Nathanael's dislike to know where it came from. There are two main options. One is that since Nathanael came from Cana, a neighbouring village to Nazareth, there may have been some historic ill-feeling between the two, not dissimilar to that which exists between some fenland villages. The problem is, that if there was, this is the only evidence of it.

A second possibility is that Nazareth, like the whole of Galilee, was seen as completely the wrong place for the Messiah who was thought to come from Judaea, the southern kingdom, and specifically from Bethlehem. It's worth noting that Galilee in the north had only relatively recently become part of the Jewish nation again. After the northern kingdom fell in 722 BC, the Assyrians mixed up the population and, for all intents and purposes, the northern kingdom, as it had existed before then, came to an end, but during the period of the Maccabees (late 2nd century BC) Galilee was brought back into the Jewish nation. As a result, Jews from Judaea, which had always been Jewish, regarded Galilee suspiciously, and certainly *not* the place that the Messiah would come from. Of course, the problem with this is that Nathanael was also from Galilee. If this is what he meant, there may have been certain sarcasm behind his question.

As with so many of these issues, we will probably never know what Nathanael had against Nazareth; the real point of the story is what happened next. Nathanael expressed a view steeped in prejudice (whether of his own or one more widely held) and Philip simply responded with the words '*Come and see. Come, see for yourself.*' Philip's invitation to Nathanael was to leave behind the track upon which he was set and to look again at what he knew to be true. Of course, the outcome was an encounter with Jesus, where Nathanael realised not only that something good could indeed come out of Nazareth, but that it *had* in the person of Jesus.

This passage illustrates that it is not just a lack of curiosity which prevents us from engaging deeper in our faith. Sometimes, as was the case with Nathanael, it can be prejudice. Or, to put it more gently, knowing already that something is the case so that we don't need to investigate further. So often, our minds are so firmly set on a certain course that we cannot see beyond it. We don't intend to be closed minded, we simply don't expect to find anything good in a certain place, so we don't. On occasions like this, we need someone like Philip to challenge us to think again, to look beyond what we know to be true and to see it with fresh eyes.

Sometimes turning aside to see how God might be calling or speaking to us comes naturally, but sometimes we need help. Sometimes we need the intervention of someone like Philip who is able to come alongside us and suggest that we might '*come and see*' before we decide too firmly that what is over there simply cannot be of God. Indeed, the challenge of faithful Christian

living is being open to the ‘Philips’ we meet along the way who invite us to ‘*come and see*’. The ‘Philips’ we meet along the way may not always be right, but if we decide that before going to see, we risk missing an encounter with the one who knows everything about us.

Nathanael’s encounter with Jesus was particularly remarkable as he moves from doubting that anything good can come from Nazareth, thereby questioning that this Jesus whom Philip is so excited about could be anyone special, to being one of the first to express belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. In conversation with Jesus, he discovers that Jesus knows far more about him than he expected. Jesus acknowledges him as ‘*truly an Israelite*’, living in God’s ‘shalom’ where each one has their own vine and fig tree. The change is extraordinary as Nathanael heaps Jesus with titles: ‘*Israel’s King*’, ‘*God’s Son*’. And, with that, Jesus promises Nathanael much more, that he’ll see great things – ‘*You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*’ What a promise for a man who was initially so dismissive of Jesus being the one Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the prophets also wrote.

If Nathanael didn’t believe that Philip’s claims of Jesus being the promised Messiah were true, all it took was for him to respond to Philip’s invitation to ‘*Come and see*’ to find out for himself that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

It’s easy to allow ourselves to be blinded by stereotypes of places, people or things; perhaps there’s a bit of the Muriel Donnelly in all of us. But, if we do, then we miss the wonder and the beauty waiting to be discovered. Maybe there are areas of discipleship that we instinctively dismiss, saying that they’re definitely not for us. We might turn down invitations to join a Bible study group, or reject suggestions to take up daily reading of the Bible, or keeping a prayer journal. But until we try something new, we never know what benefit we might gain. Is there something to which God is prompting you to say ‘yes’?

Or it may be that you’re being called to be a ‘Philip’ to someone on the edge of faith. Someone who maybe comes to the occasional service, perhaps at Christmas, but doesn’t come back, maybe thinking that Christianity isn’t for them? If God has placed someone’s name on your heart, prompting you to make contact and be the one, like Philip, who encourages someone to ‘*come and see*’, then maybe today is the day to make that call. Like in the case of Nathanael, what a difference you could make!