

*Year B, 2018*  
*Fr. Robert D. Arnold*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany*  
*St. John 1:43-51*

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

When vesting for worship, I have a series of prayers I recite as I put on each garment. They are very old prayers. I used to say them regularly but in time got away from it largely because the sacristies in my recent churches were like thoroughfares of people coming and going. When we remodeled this sacristy and added the sliding doors, I was so used to greeting the people coming through that I never closed them to get back those prayers. But there's one prayer that I've never stopped praying and that's the prayer I say before reading the Gospel: "Bless, O Lord, my mouth and my lips that I may proclaim your Word."

Proclaiming the Word of God is the job of a preacher. I don't think it's enough to just say a word for Jesus; the task is to say a good word for the Lord. After all, He is the One who shows us the Father; He is the One who ushers in the kingdom of God; He is the author of good news; He is the Word made flesh. Saying a good word for Jesus is not just a preacher's job, of course, but it's also the task of every baptized Christian—every disciple of Christ. So, how can we say a good word for Jesus?

Philip is one of the first examples we have of the disciple's task to go say a good word for Jesus, so his words and actions might be instructive. There are lots of ways to say a good word for Jesus, and not all of them are verbal. In fact, if people know you're a Christian, everything you say and do is a word for Jesus—good or otherwise.

Philip had discovered something in Jesus that went to the deepest regions of his soul. It filled him with joy—as it always does when we find or are found by the very thing for which our hearts and minds most long. When you resonate that profoundly with another person—when you know that kind of joy—you just can't keep it to yourself. Philip went and found his friend, Nathanael. Nathanael wasn't a stranger! Philip knew him. And more importantly, he knew not only who he was but also something about him. Philip knew something of that for which Nathanael's heart and mind most longed. The Gospel passage gives us hints about Nathanael: Nathanael was reading under a fig tree—a way ancient Jews would describe

Bible study. Nathanael was searching the Scriptures and longing for the fulfillment of their great promise. Furthermore, Philip doesn't try to tell Nathanael what he, Nathanael, is thinking or feeling, but only what he, Philip, has experienced. Nathanael is educated enough to know that the Messiah would not be born in Nazareth—given its reputation: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”. And Philip is wise enough not to get into a debate about it. Instead, he shares what he has experienced, and invites Nathanael to come and see for himself. You see, it wasn't Philip's task to convert Nathanael—nor is it our task to convert anyone. If there's any converting to be done, Jesus will do it. The task of the disciple—Philip's and ours—is simply to witness to what we have experienced with those whose deepest longings we know something about, and to invite them to come and see for themselves.

Sometimes, you know, even when we do it right, the light doesn't come on. Eli was a priest with great integrity. He rose in the ranks of priests to be the one to serve next to the Ark of the Covenant—the Ark of God. Time and disappointment had taken a toll on Eli. He had trained his three sons to follow in his footsteps, but they turned out to be good-for-nothings. They behaved badly with the people and sinned before the Lord. You would be hard-pressed to say that they were faithful priests who knew the Lord. Eli knew of their behavior but was powerless to do anything about it. We read that Eli's eyesight had grown dim so that he could not see. But it also says, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out”. Three times his young assistant, Samuel, came to him in the night thinking Eli must have called him and three times Eli sent him back to bed. But after that third time, Eli considered that maybe this is the Lord. He had that little bit of perception—that ounce of faith left to perceive that God might be trying to get through to Samuel who, we read, did not know the Lord. Eli invites Samuel to engage the voice himself. If the voice speaks to you again, try saying, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” It worked. Samuel rose to become a great prophet of God in Israel.

When the word of the Lord is rare as it is in these days, when visions are not widespread, when countless baptized children have abandoned the faith of their fathers and mothers and no longer know the Lord, this, it seems to me, is evangelism with integrity. And the church—especially the

mainline church—needs to rediscover evangelism partnered with integrity. Too much of the evangelism encountered in modern America is an aggressive assault by self-righteous strangers who in most cases don't even know their "targets," haven't bothered to listen carefully to their story in the hope of discovering something of what their lives long for, and who share, not what they have experienced or where they find meaning for their lives, but some abbreviated three-step plan that will get you directly to heaven. It leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many Christians, and as a result, evangelism has become a dirty word for too many of us.

It remains, however, the task of every disciple to say a good word for Jesus and a good word for His church. Let Philip be our example. He knew Nathanael, not simply as an acquaintance but in some depth. He knew something about Nathanael, about where he was on his spiritual journey, about what his heart and mind longed for—and he simply invited Nathanael to come and see for himself. That's evangelism with integrity! That's sharing the good news! That's saying a good word for Jesus! Amen.