Epiphany 2 year B 17th Jan.

This Sunday’s readings are a preacher’s nightmare especially one with dyslexia! As many rich sermon themes are flowing through them.

However, as honed the ideas down I settled on 3 little words.

Seeing-Finding -Perceiving.

These words express the way various individuals and groups reacted to Jesus. This is a fitting way to follow the season of Christmas, because now we are given the opportunity to learn who this Jesus is through the eyes of those who met him.

The invitation of the Epiphany season is for us to witness God’s glory as it is revealed in the incarnate Christ.

These 3 words ‘seeing’, ‘finding’ and ‘perceiving’ can have quite mundane meanings: ‘I see people as I gaze out of my study window’: I found a book I thought I had lost: ‘I couldn’t quite perceive the news I was hearing.’

All these words also have heightened meanings which add the expectancy and excitement of comprehending something that once seemed ordinary to a new and important level. What cold be the ah ha or eureka moment.

In our passage from John’s Gospel this morning we can see a fair number of the latter. Jesus *‘found’*Philip – we can almost imagine Jesus knowing the kind of man he needs, he is looking for the right person, and there he was. We can imagine Philip rushing around until he *found* Nathaniel – purposefully looking for him, and then ‘Ah, *there* he is’. And certainly, Philip’s words ‘We’ve *found* him about whom Moses and the prophets wrote’ is an account of finding something of great excitement’ Phillip perceived that there was something more, something other about this person called Jesus.

‘Come and *see’*is Philip’s demand or order to Nathaniel. He’s conveying something exciting something urgent and important in these words. Then Jesus*saw*Nathaniel coming towards him as he had *seen*him earlier under the fig tree. Nathaniel, initially a little sceptical of Jesus, but won over by Jesus’ insight.

This is more than Jesus noticing that there was some man with a red robe and a spectacular beard. This is deeper understanding / recognition of who this man really was. Certainly, these verses don’t make sense if the ‘seeing’ was on a mundane level.

When Jesus saw, Nathaniel he saw him fully, understood who he was! And of course, the reading ends with the verse about ‘*seeing* angels’.

Jesus calls both Nathaniel and us to a deeper experience than that of mere witnesses of a small perception of Nathaniel’s true character.

In the enigmatic reference to Jacob’s ladder, Jesus claims that he is the one who will both reveal God’s glory to the world and be the “channel” through which God’s presence, glory and purpose is mediated to the world.

The call to See-Find -Perceive and witness God’s presence and glory is affirmed by all of the other readings for this week.

Samuel’s experience of God’s manifestation and communication reveals both God’s desire to connect with humanity, and the human capacity to find and connect with God. The psalmist’s song reveals how intimately God relates to the people God has created, and how deeply we can know God. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reveals the way God continues to be incarnate within every person who believes, as we become temples of God’s Spirit, and are called to use our whole self in God’s service. We become the ones by which others See-Find and Perceive God.

The important thing about all this is that truly seeing, truly finding, truly perceiving demands a kind of openness or concentration or focus. How often do we go round with our eyes and minds closed missing so much, by not engaging fully with God’s world? Eyes and minds closed to experiencing or knowing God in any other way other than the box we have put him in.

I firmly believe that we have much to learn from children as they are often far more perceptive of awe and wonder in and observant of everyday life than adults are. Their minds are more open and less cynical– they are still discovering the world. They often see the detail we miss, don’t think about or notice. My lockdown days have been brightened by a regular knock on the door by Aoife Keating, (accompanied by her dad). As she often has questions and comments and observations which are refreshingly to the point like why is one tree outside the vicarage and the other in the car park?

 I love the way Children can be deeply fascinated by detail we might consider unimportant. It reminds me of the enjoyment I had working with under-fives before my ordination. The minutia that children would observe always enabled me to see the world from a different and often somewhat quirky perspective.

Somehow, as adults most of us have lost the ability to stop and stare and see the minutia in nature or go wow that often. We allow the world to go past us in a blur, without noticing. And when we do notice things, it’s usually things we don’t like: litter or broken pavements or graffiti, we seem more likely to notice someone who pushes in front of us in a queue, than we are someone who gives way to us or smiles. Maybe I am being cynical but that’s how it feels to me sometimes.

One thing the pandemic has highlighted for me is the need to be attentive, to the people I meet, the places I travel through – to be open to wonder, including the wonder of people, the wonder of God’s world, and even (although this one is always a struggle, the wonder of me – for I, too, am a child of God.) and so are you – we are all wonderful because God created us.

Our own wonder is something many of us struggle to see, an inability my clergy colleagues and I share in our discussions. All too often our vision is limited to seeing, the things we have not done or can’t do or wished we could do or not noticed something that needed doing, or not understood what someone was really saying to us.

These small, but important, factors impact every relationship, from families to churches to neighbourhoods. This struggle to believe in our own worth and capability to rise to the challenges of modern living. This struggle manifests itself in the constant need to prove ourselves, in defensiveness when we are challenged, and in fear of sharing our resource in case we end up with less than we need.

Our struggle to recognise the glory in the humanity of others – particularly those who are different from us, results in factions and divisions between people along racial, gender, religious, sexual, economic and educational lines, and often leads us to treat one another with disdain, suspicion and even hostility.

We fail to See-Find -Perceive the wonder God can see in us and in others.

We are lost- we can’t see God because behaviour and our attitudes have concealed his true presence from us.

The message of this week’s Lectionary gives us ways to overcome these struggles. As we begin to recognise the way God has revealed God’s self to us in Christ, and how we have become, in ourselves, temple’s of God’s Spirit, when we recognise ths we are able to accept our worth and our significance in God’s purposes and God’s domain.

When this sinks into our hearts, we are able to relax into our new identity in Christ, and stop striving against others to feel good about ourselves and find that inner peace we all long for.

When we are able to recognise God’s glory in others, and affirm them as temples of God’s Spirit, we begin to see them as Christ and treat them as Christ, which naturally leads us into collaboration, affirmation, forgiveness and acceptance of one another. And, as we allow ourselves to believe in God’s revealed glory in ourselves and those we live and worship with, we discover that God’s glory is not only revealed to us but is revealed through us.

Therefore, we have to be mindful of our own behaviour-watch out that our beliefs don’t make us dismissive of others. Sadly Christians are notoriously dismissive of people we consider immoral, or morally deficient and it’s easy for members of most religions to belittle others faith, something that is evident in so many news stories.

The key to all this is that God *‘sees’* us and ‘finds’ us. We know this because that’s’ what Jesus did, both in his life and in his incarnation – he came to be with us – he sought us out. Jesus’ way of seeing is with compassion and love. He noticed people’s pain and desperation and he healed and comforted. He also saw people who were dismissive of others – and he gave them a hard time about it.

Psalm 139 has long been a ‘go to psalm’ for me a psalm in praise of God’s creation of the psalmist and the intimate way in which God knows him, inside and out. My reminder that God *sees*us – sees and knows us completely, our faults and strengths, our joys and sorrows. And God sees all this with love.

God is able to see our faults without dismissing us as lost causes, even when we think we are! but rather God loves us -despite and because of who we are. Maybe we could all spend some time this week thinking about what it’s like to be completely known and completely loved.

What God certainly doesn’t do is what Nathaniel did in today’s Gospel reading: ‘ Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ – a way of dismissing a whole town full of people by simple prejudice. How easy it is to condemn Daniel for saying it but how often are we guilty of similar generalisations?

I am sure some will remember the phrase when Ofsted first came into education ‘If you can, do: if you can’t, teach: and if you can’t teach, become an Ofsted inspector’. Similar phrases are found in every profession. As humorous as they are, we all know what really happens when whole groups of people are dismissed and ridiculed. On such prejudice as this, the holocaust was carried out, slavery happened, apartheid was built, bullying, racism, sexism and homophobia still persist. One of the saddest human traits, is the tendency to feel better about ourselves by denigrating others.

Today’s gospel requires us to see others as we are seen by God, to love as we are loved. An impossible job, but one to which we are called.

It also asks us to notice, to see, to pay attention.

 After all, it’s a beautiful world we’ve been given by God – let’s open our eyes to its wonders, and let’s pay attention to it’s slow destruction.

 Let’s truly see, truly find, truly perceive and faithfully respond do our part in making this world a better place by all that we think how we act and how respond to what

we see, look at, and perceive others and the world around.