

I watched a fascinating documentary on television recently. As many of you may know, Susan and I spent some time in the United States when we were younger, and we still stay in touch with its politics. The documentary was discussing the election of Donald Trump, and the role the media, particularly the internet, played in his election.

Now, I'm not going to discuss his politics, but it was interesting to hear how American news has become polarized along political lines. If you're a Republican, you tend to look at Fox News and if you're a Democrat, it's CNN.

But it's worse on social media. Apparently, computers use algorithms to encourage people to use their services. Computers learn your political beliefs and only give you news or editorial opinions to suit your tastes. It doesn't challenge your viewpoint because that would stop you logging in, and simply reinforces your opinion or prejudices. In many ways, this explains the extreme divide that now exists in American politics.

People don't hear the other side. To them, other arguments don't exist.

Now, you might think you're insulated from this in the UK but actually, it's infiltrating our culture too. People historically tend to gravitate towards newspapers that suit their viewpoint but now, there's a genuine concern this is present in more major news outlets.

Because society consumes information differently these days. People don't want detailed journalism. They want to absorb as much information in as little time as possible. You probably notice this yourselves. The news jumps from one item to the next. You've barely got time to collect your thoughts before it's something else

And because of this desire for a quick fix, there's a risk we only get one side of the argument or worse, a headline and an editor's opinion.

We don't get all the facts, and neither are we encouraged to think and form an opinion for ourselves.

And it's with this thought that I'd like to turn to our reading this morning. The story of Nathanael is the first in a series of studies looking at the followers of Jesus. These are people who may not feature prominently in the Gospels, but their stories have huge significance and meaning for us. And Nathanael's story is a fascinating one.

There's a lot of controversy about the figure of Nathanael. His name is only present in John's gospel, in this chapter and also chapter 21. In fact, his name doesn't appear at all in the other gospels and this has led some scholars to suggest that he didn't exist at all. Instead, he was an idealized figure created by John to represent Jewish converts to Christianity. Other scholars have expanded on this and wondered if he could even be the beloved disciple that's mentioned

throughout the Fourth Gospel. Some have even suggested that he could be Matthew, because both names mean “The gift of God”.

And as appealing as those ideas are, I’m not sure they’re correct. There’s another theory that Nathanael is actually the first name of Bartholomew, the Apostle we read about in the other gospels and also in Acts 1:13. I like this idea because Bartholomew, who is clearly an associate of Philip, is mentioned in Matthew, Mark and Luke, but not John where we see Nathanael’s name instead.

And Bartholomew was actually a surname at that time, so we’d expect him to have another, first name.

So if he really is Nathanael Bartholomew, I don’t think he’s the incidental figure we might think at first glance and he is a very prominent follower of Jesus.

But his journey to Christ wasn’t straight forward by any means. When Philip told him he found the Messiah, his first response, I think is almost funny.

“Nazareth! How can anything good come from there?” You can almost imagine the sarcasm in his voice.

And although Nathanael came from Cana, I don’t think he was saying this because of some intertown rivalry – it wasn’t a Glasgow vs Edinburgh debate.

Nazareth was the last place you’d expect the Messiah to come from. It was a small town, so insignificant that it doesn’t even get mentioned in the Old Testament or literature from the day. And people were told that the Messiah was coming from Bethlehem, so you could imagine Nathanael’s laughter and derision at this idea. Nothing good will come from Nazareth.

And Nathanael would have good understanding of Scripture to challenge the Nazareth idea. He was clearly very familiar with scripture to the extent that Jesus comments on this by saying that Nathanael was under the fig tree.

The comment about the fig tree is important. In those times, Rabbis would often study and teach under a fig tree, so it became a symbol of Jewish Law, the Torah and also a place of spiritual peace. It’s why Jesus uses it symbolically in his teaching. When he curses the fig tree elsewhere, he’s actually saying the Torah is finished and he’s inaugurating a new law in Christ.

So when Jesus said that Nathanael was under the fig tree, he’s actually saying that he knew Nathanael was absolutely devoted to the Torah or Jewish law

But let’s go back to Nathanael’s comment about Nazareth. This, I think is a hugely important part of this passage.

Nathanael made a judgment about Jesus based on no evidence whatsoever. He never met Jesus. He didn’t know he was born in Bethlehem. He was basing that view on rumour, hearsay and his personal opinion.

And this, I think is the challenge we face in the church today.

I would suggest to you that people don't want to come to church because, like Nathanael, they've got the completely wrong idea of what we represent and what we do.

They've formed an opinion based on the opinion of other people. An opinion, rather than the facts.

You've probably noticed this. It's very hard to find anything positive about the church these days. Do people acknowledge the support offered to our community? Or the support for our charity work abroad? The fellowship we offer to the lonely? Or our sense of morality and social justice?

Or do you usually hear people criticising our church based on events from history, or the actions of a minority who have hidden behind a veil of false faith to commit terrible crimes?

It doesn't surprise me that people want to avoid that church. Because I don't want to associate myself with that church either.

Because that's not our church. That's not the loving community that gathers here each Sunday. A fellowship in Christ that does so much fantastic work in Kinross, often discretely and unnoticed.

And so how do we address this? Especially when we see falling numbers at worship each week?

Well, when I read this passage, it struck me that the answer is staggeringly simple. Philip shows us exactly what we should do.

When he's faced with Nathanael's doubts and cynicism, he doesn't start evangelizing. He doesn't offer complex theological debates to address all the misunderstandings, tackling Nathanael at his level as a devout scholar of the Torah.

Philip simply says, "Come and see"

He brings Nathanael into Christ's presence.

And when he does this, something amazing happens.

Because Nathanael has that first encounter with Jesus.

An encounter where Jesus sees right into Nathanael's heart. Jesus says, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you"

In other words, Nathanael realized that Jesus, this man he had never met, already knew who he was. But more than that, Nathanael realized that Jesus loved him deeply for the person he was. Faults and all.

For those of you who have found Christ, do you remember that first encounter, like Nathanael?

That moment when you realised that God knows the real you?

That realization that He loves you, and He sees the good in you, no matter what you've done before?

Because that, I think is the most persuasive way to bring people to church.

We spend too much time getting lost in theological debates trying to bring people to faith. Trying to challenge the arguments of the militant atheists. Trying to address their misconceptions about historical events or having to justify our charitable activity.

Because I don't think you can argue someone into Christianity.

Especially against the tidal wave of negativity against the church today.

Instead, we should do exactly as Philip did here, and bring people into Christ's presence. Show them the power of God's love.

And that doesn't have to be in this physical building, at worship on a Sunday.

Just being a disciple of Christ and following his example of loving others, is the first step of bringing people to him.

And being prepared, when people ask why you do this, to share your experience of Christ's love.

Because it's that relationship with Christ that is the basis of our church. It's that love for Christ that brings us together each week to fulfill God's mission in this parish.

And it is that love which, I think, is the most powerful argument for Christianity. It's one that's impossible to challenge once you've experienced it.

And so I would ask you to look at ways to share Christ's love and be his disciple, because our community needs the hope of Christ more than ever.

Especially as we build this new world after COVID.

We need to do what Philip did, and show people that joy.

Because as Jesus said at the end of this passage, if they accept Christ, they will find greater things in Him than their previous life.

In other words, once we accept Christ into our lives, the wonders of God, the joy we share as Christians, the blessings and the promises given to the Patriarchs, will be ours. We have been given that gift.

And it is a gift that I hope we can share with others and a gift that I know will grow this church and allow it to do even more wonderful things in this community.

It is a gift of love that brings us ever closer to the joy and peace of Christ's Kingdom

Amen.