

Historic Commentary

(Second Sunday in Epiphany - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 1:43-51 from Selected Church Fathers and Reformers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): "To every thoughtful person there is a benefit" ... and Christ implied more than this when he said, "He that seeks finds." This is why I no longer wonder how it was that Philip followed Christ. Andrew was persuaded when he heard from John, and Peter was persuaded when he heard from Andrew. But Philip, not having learned anything from anyone but Christ who said to him only this, "Follow me," immediately obeyed and did not go back. In fact, he even became a preacher to others. For he ran to Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote." Do you see what a thoughtful mind he had, how assiduously he meditated on the writings of Moses, expecting the advent? For the expression "we have found" belongs always to those who are in some way seeking.

[Augustine](#): [They refer to him as] "Jesus, the son of Joseph." He was called the son of the man to whom his mother had been espoused. For all Christians know well from the Gospel that he was conceived and born while she was still a virgin. But this is what Philip said to Nathanael, and he added the place, "from Nazareth." And Nathanael said to him, "From Nazareth something good can come." What is the meaning here, brothers? Not as some read, for it could be read, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" For the words of Philip follow, who says, "Come and see." But the words of Philip can suitably follow both readings, whether you read it as a confirmation, that is, "from Nazareth something good can come," to which Philip replies, "come and see"; or whether you read it as doubting, making the whole thing into a question, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Come and see."

[Clement of Alexandria](#): Nathanael readily agrees that he expects great things to appear out of Nazareth. It is, I suppose, perfectly clear that not only did he take Nazareth as a pledge of what he sought but, bringing together knowledge from Moses and the prophets as one fond of learning, he gained a pretty quick understanding. "Come and see," [Philip] says. Sight will suffice for faith. All you need to do is talk with him, and you will be all the more ready to confess and say without hesitation that he is indeed the expected One. But we must also believe that there was a divine and ineffable grace flowing from the words of

our Savior that proved alluring for the souls of his hearers. ... For since his word is mighty in power, it is also efficacious to persuade.

Chrysostom: He praises and approves the man because he had said, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” And yet, shouldn’t have Jesus rather found fault in him? Surely not; for the words are not those of an unbeliever or one deserving blame, but praise. How can you say that? Because Nathanael had considered the writings of the prophets more than Philip. For he had heard from the Scriptures that Christ must come from Bethlehem, and from the village in which David was. This belief at least prevailed among the Jews, and the prophet had proclaimed it of old. ... And so when he heard that Jesus was “from Nazareth,” he was confounded and doubted, not finding the announcement of Philip to agree with the prediction of the prophet.

Augustine: “Behold, truly an Israelite in whom there is no guile” is something said neither to Andrew, nor Peter nor to Philip. It was said to Nathanael.... What do we make of it then, brothers? Ought he to have been first among the apostles? Not only is he not found to be first among the apostles, but Nathanael is neither in the middle nor last among the Twelve, Nathanael, to whom the Son of God bore such great witness, saying, “Behold, truly an Israelite in whom there is no guile.” Is the reason asked? As far as the Lord makes known, we find a probable answer. For we ought to understand that Nathanael himself was educated and skilled in the law. Therefore the Lord did not wish to place him among the disciples because he chose unlearned men whereby he might confound the world.

Now Jacob had been called in Scripture a man without guile. Jacob himself, as you know, was surnamed Israel. That is why in the Gospel, when the Lord saw Nathanael, he said, “Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile.” And that Israelite, not yet knowing who was speaking to him, replied, “How do you know me?” And the Lord said to him, “While you were under the fig tree I saw you,” as though to say, “While you were under the shadow of sin, I predestined you.” And Nathanael, remembering he had been under the fig tree where the Lord had not been, recognized the divinity in him and answered, “You are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel.” Though he was under the fig tree, he did not become a withered fig tree; he acknowledged Christ. And the Lord said to him, “Because I said, While you were under the fig tree I saw you, is that why you believe? You shall see greater things than that.” What are these greater things? “Amen, I tell you.” Because that man is an Israelite in whom there is no guile, look back to Jacob, in whom there is no guile, and recollect, when Jesus tells you, the stone at his head, the vision in his sleep, the stairs from earth to heaven, the beings coming down and going up; and then see what the Lord says to the Israelite without guile: “You shall see heaven opened”—listen, guileless Nathanael, to what guileless Jacob saw—“and angels going up and coming down”—to whom?—“to the Son of man.”

Ambrose: Would that Jesus would cast a glance on me still lying under that barren fig tree, and that my fig tree might also after three years bear fruit. But how can sinners have that kind of hope? If only that gospel dresser of the vineyard, perhaps already bidden to cut down my fig tree, would at least let it alone this year also, until he digs around it and fertilizes it so that he may by some chance lift the helpless out of the dust and lift the

poor out of the mire ... The fig tree, that is, the tempting attraction of the pleasures of the world, still overshadows me, low in height, brittle for working, soft for use and barren of fruit.

Augustine: You know from what the first sinners, Adam and Eve, made themselves aprons. When they had sinned, they made themselves aprons from fig leaves and covered their shameful parts, because it was by sinning that they caused themselves to feel shame about them. So if the first sinners made themselves aprons, the couple from whom we derive our origins, in whom we had gotten lost so that he would come to seek and to save what had gotten lost—if they made them out of fig leaves to cover their shameful parts, what else could it mean, “When you were under the fig tree I saw you,” but “You would not have come to the cleanser of sin unless he had first seen you in the shadow of sin”? In order for us to see, we have been seen; in order for us to love, we have been loved.

Chrysostom: Many, when they read this passage, are perplexed at finding that Peter was pronounced blessed for having, after our Lord’s miracles and teaching, confessed him to be the Son of God. Nathanael, who makes the same confession before Peter, receives no such blessing. The reason is this: Peter and Nathanael both used the same words but not in the same way. Peter confessed our Lord to be the Son of God, in the sense of him being very God. Nathanael confessed him to be the Son of God only as a mere man. For after saying, “You are the Son of God,” he adds, “You are the King of Israel.” But the Son of God was not only the King of Israel but of the whole world.

This is clear from what follows. For in the case of Peter, Christ added nothing, but, as if his faith were already perfect, told him that he would build the church on his confession. In the case of Nathanael, he treats his confession as deficient and needing to progress further upwards.

Chrysostom: Do you see how he leads him up little by little from the earth and causes him no longer to imagine him as merely a man? For one to whom angels minister and on whom angels ascend and descend, how could he be a man? This is why he said, “You shall see greater things than these.” And to prove this, he introduces the ministry of angels. What he means is something like this: Does this, O Nathanael, seem to you a great matter, and have you for this confessed me to be King of Israel? What then will you say when you see “angels ascending and descending on me”? He persuades him by these words to receive him as Lord also of the angels. For on him as on the king’s own son, the royal ministers ascended and descended, once at the season of the crucifixion, again at the time of the resurrection and the ascension, and before this also, when they “came and ministered to him.” They also ascended and descended when they proclaimed the good news of his birth and cried, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,” when they came to Mary and also when they came to Joseph.... Our Lord made the present a proof of the future. After the powers he had already shown, Nathanael would readily believe that much more would follow.

Ambrose: Jacob set out and slept—evidence of tranquility of spirit—and saw angels of God ascending and descending. This means he foresaw Christ on earth; the band of angels was descending to Christ and ascending to him, so as to render service to their rightful master in loving service.

Augustine: There is something greater than “I saw you under the fig tree.” [Jesus said, “We shall see greater things than these,”] because it is a greater thing that our Lord has justified us, whom he has called, than that he saw us lying under the shadow of death. For what profit would it have been to us if we had remained where he saw us? Should we not be lying there? And so, what is this greater thing? When have we seen angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man?...

Good preachers who preach Christ are like angels of God; that is, they ascend and descend on the Son of man ... Take for instance Paul, who ascended to the third heaven ... and descended so far that he even gave milk to babies. ... Take for instance the father who is well skilled in speaking, who is such an orator that the forum resounds with his eloquence and the judgment seats shake—if he has a little son, on his return home he puts aside the forensic eloquence to which he had ascended and in child’s language descends to his little one.... If the Lord himself ascended and descended, it is evident that his preachers ascend by imitation and descend by preaching.

Martin Luther: That these words were not dictated by a spirit of malice is shown by the praise which Christ later bestows on Nathanael when he says that he was a true Israelite devoid of guile. We dare not interpret these words uncharitably. It would have been different had they been spoken by a proud Pharisee, or by Annas or by Caiphas. From their lips these words would have been demonic and spiteful, meaning to convey: “What are you saying about this Jesus of Nazareth? Are you stupid and crazy? Don’t you see that we are rulers and that we have the authority to interpret Scripture?” That would have been venom. For those people despised Christ, and their words were inspired by an arrogant contempt for him. They would say, “What do you mean by that? Who, after all, is that Christ?” Words must be understood and interpreted with an ear to the voice of the speaker’s heart. Every bell has its own peculiar ring and tone. Thus Nathanael utters these words here as a pious, good and simple-minded man who believes the sayings of Moses and the prophets. They are free from cunning and wickedness; they were prompted by surprise at the statement that so much good could come from Nazareth. He wants to say, “Who would ever have expected that of Nazareth?” His words betoken his joyful surprise: “Well, my dear friend, is it true that the Messiah was to come from Nazareth?”

Now Nathanael follows Philip. And when he stands face to face with the Lord, the Lord declares, “An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” This means that he is a simple-minded, believing Israelite. Christ divides the people of Israel, to whom the Messiah was promised, into two classes. He wants to say: “My people are separated into two groups. First of all there is the entire nation of Israel, all of whom are Israelites indeed; but a number of these are, at the same time, pseudo-Israelites. They pride themselves on being of the lineage and the blood of the patriarch Israel or Jacob, on being

Abraham's children, his flesh and blood. They boast of Abraham. But the majority of these have turned away from Abraham and his promises; they have resorted to the works of the Law and have taken recourse to self-invented and false acts of worship. The others, the true Israelites, are those who share the faith of Abraham." ...

Thus Christ wishes to say here: "There are both true and false Israelites, both of whom, to be sure, are descended from the patriarch Israel, but not all of whom retained the promise and the faith of Abraham." Similarly, we have two classes of Christians today. All of us who were baptized and reborn through baptism are indeed called Christians, but we do not all remain true to baptism. Many desert Christ and become false Christians. There is a scarcity of true Christians, and there is also a false and a true Christian church. The former boast and claim that they are the true church and the real Christians, just as the Jews said that they were the true Israelites. They glory solely in the title and the name, saying, "After all, we are baptized and bear the Christian name." We must concede this point, but for all that, they are not the true Christians.... They are called Christians, as the Jews were known as Israelites; but they are only nominal Christians....

When Christians are baptized, they give ear to the gospel, read holy Scripture, partake of holy Communion and love their neighbor. Such Christians are genuine Christians; they are entitled to the name. But then, too, there are false Christians. They also make use of baptism and holy Communion and are just as conversant with Scripture as the true Christians are. Both they and we possess the divine Word. But they are only outward and nominal Christians. They do not believe, and internally they are full of unbelief, envy, hatred and vice.

Martin Bucer: This was a confession of a heart burning with faith and leaping for joy. For although all the saints are children of God, in whose image they are formed by his Spirit (and so God calls Israel his son), the Lord Jesus nevertheless is, in a singular way, the only-begotten Son of God foretold in the Scriptures because in him is the sole express image of the Father. He is full of wisdom, righteousness and power. In 2 Samuel 7[:14] and 1 Chronicles 17[:13] we have the promise of this Lord Christ under the figure of Solomon.... And the psalmist declares, "He will call on me, 'You are my Father, the rock of my salvation.' I will make him the firstborn, supreme over the kings of the earth." Likewise, "The Lord has said to me, 'You are my son, this day have I begotten you.' "

Learned in these and other similar prophecies, Nathanael hailed the Lord Jesus with a more majestic title, calling him "Son of God and king of Israel," while it was usual for the common people to call the Messiah the Son of David. And thence, those who acknowledged Jesus to be the anointed of the Lord hailed him as the Son of David. Moreover, among the Hebrews "Son of God" has the same meaning as "God," just as "Son of Man" has the same meaning as "man." Thus, "sons of God" is posited for gods. It is clear, then, that Nathanael acknowledged the Lord to be greater than a human being when he confessed him to be the Son of God. Finally, it seems that Nathanael called Jesus the Son of God as a counterargument to Philip's message. It is as if he said, "By no means are you the son of Joseph from Nazareth, as Philip called you, but you are the Son of God from heaven."

John Calvin:

Vs 43. Follow me.

When Philip was inflamed by this single word to follow Christ, we infer from it how great is the efficacy of the word of God; but it does not appear indiscriminately in all, for God addresses many without any advantage, just as if he struck their ears with a sound which vanished into air. So then the external preaching of the word is in itself unfruitful, except that it inflicts a deadly wound on the reprobate, so as to render them inexcusable before God. But when the secret grace of God quickens it, all the senses must be affected in such a manner that men will be prepared to follow wherever God calls them. We ought, therefore, to pray to Christ that he may display in us the same power of the Gospel. In the case of Philip, there was no doubt a peculiarity about his following Christ; for he is commanded to follow, not like one of us, but as a domestic, and as a familiar companion. But still the calling of all of us is illustrated by this calling of Philip.

Vs 45. Philip finds Nathanael.

Though proud men despise these feeble beginnings of the Church, yet we ought to perceive in them a brighter display of the divine glory, than if the condition of the Kingdom of Christ had been in every respect, from the outset, splendid and magnificent; for we know to how rich a harvest this small seed afterwards grew. Again, we see in Philip the same desire of building which formerly appeared in Andrew. His modesty, too, is remarkable, in desiring and seeking nothing else than to have others to learn along with him, from Him who is a Teacher common to all. We have found Jesus. How small was the measure of Philip's faith appears from this circumstance, that he cannot utter a few words about Christ without mingling with them two gross errors. He calls him the son of Joseph, and says, that Nazareth was his native town, both of which statements were false; and yet, because he is sincerely desirous to do good to his brother, and to make Christ known, God approves of this instance of his diligence, and even crowns it with good success. Each of us ought, no doubt, to endeavor to keep soberly within his own limits; and, certainly, the Evangelist does not mention it as worthy of commendation in Philip, that he twice disgraces Christ, but relates that his doctrine, though faulty and involved in error, was useful, because it nevertheless had this for its object, that Christ might be truly known. He foolishly says that he was the son of Joseph, and ignorantly calls him a native of Nazareth, but yet he leads Nathanael to no other than the Son of God who was born in Bethlehem, (Matthew 2:1,) and does not contrive a false Christ, but only wishes that they should know him as he was exhibited by Moses and the Prophets. We see, then, that the chief design of doctrine is, that those who hear us should come to Christ in some way or other.

Come and see.

Nathanael allowed his twofold error to be corrected by this expression which Philip uttered. Following his example, let us first show ourselves to be submissive and obedient; and next, let us not shrink from inquiry, when Christ himself is ready to remove the doubts which harass us. Those who read these words not as a question, but as an affirmation, Some good thing may come out of Nazareth, are greatly mistaken. For, in the first place, how trivial would such an observation be? And next, we know that the city Nazareth was not at that time held in estimation; and Philip's reply shows plainly enough that it was

expressive of hesitation and distrust.

Vs 49. Thou art the Son of God.

That he acknowledges him to be the Son of God from his divine power is not wonderful; but on what ground does he call him King of Israel? for the two things do not appear to be necessarily connected. But Nathanael takes a loftier view. He had already heard that he is the Messiah, and to this doctrine he adds the confirmation which had been given him. He holds also another principle, that the Son of God will not come without exercising the office of King over the people of God. Justly, therefore, does he acknowledge that he who is the Son of God is also King of Israel. And, indeed, faith ought not to be fixed on the essence of Christ alone, (so to speak,) but ought to attend to his power and office; for it would be of little advantage to know who Christ is, if this second point were not added, what he wishes to be towards us, and for what purpose the Father sent him. The reason why the Papists have nothing more than a shadow of Christ is, that they have been careful to look at his mere essence, but have disregarded his kingdom, which consists in the power to save. Again, when Nathanael calls him King of Israel, though his kingdom extends to the remotest bounds of the earth, the confession is limited to the measure of faith. For he had not yet advanced so far as to know that Christ was appointed to be King over the whole world, or rather, that from every quarter would be collected the children of Abraham, so that the whole world would be the Israel of God. We to whom the wide extent of Christ's kingdom has been revealed ought to go beyond those narrow limits. Yet following the example of Nathanael, let us exercise our faith in hearing the word, and let us strengthen it by all the means that are in our power; and let it not remain buried, but break out into confession.

Vs 50. Jesus answered.

He does not reprove Nathanael as if he had been too easy of belief, but rather approving of his faith, promises to him and to others that he will confirm it by stronger arguments. Besides, it was peculiar to one man that he was seen under a fig-tree by Christ, when absent and at a distance from him; but now Christ brings forward a proof which would be common to all, and thus – as if he had broken off from what he originally intended – instead of addressing one man, he turns to address all.

Vs 51. You shall see heaven opened.

They are greatly mistaken, in my opinion, who anxiously inquire into the place where, and the time when, Nathanael and others saw heaven opened; for he rather points out something perpetual which was always to exist in his kingdom. I acknowledge indeed, that the disciples sometimes saw angels, who are not seen in the present day; and I acknowledge also that the manifestation of the heavenly glory, when Christ ascended to heaven, was different from what we now behold. But if we duly consider what took place at that time, it is of perpetual duration; for the kingdom of God, which was formerly closed against us, is actually opened in Christ. A visible instance of this was shown to Stephen, (Acts 7:55,) to the three disciples on the mountain, (Matthew 17:5,) and to the other disciples at Christ's ascension, (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9.) But all the signs by which God shows himself present with us depend on this opening of heaven, more especially when God communicates himself to us to be our life.

Ascending and descending on the Son of man.

This second clause refers to angels. They are said to ascend and descend, so as to be ministers of God's kindness towards us; and therefore this mode of expression points out the mutual intercourse which exists between God and men. Now we must acknowledge that this benefit was received through Christ, because without him the angels have rather a deadly enmity against us than a friendly care to help us. They are said to ascend and descend on the son of man, not because they minister to him, but because – in reference to him, and for his honor – they include the whole body of the Church in their kindly regard. Nor have I any doubt that he alludes to the ladder which was exhibited to the patriarch Jacob in a dream, (Genesis 28:12;) for what was prefigured by that vision is actually fulfilled in Christ. In short, this passage teaches us, that though the whole human race was banished from the kingdom of God, the gate of heaven is now opened to us, so that we are fellow-citizens of the saints, and companions of the angels, (Ephesians 2:19;) and that they, having been appointed to be guardians of our salvation, descend from the blessed rest of the heavenly glory to relieve our distresses.