

## Reflection

John 1:43-51

Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

When I started thinking about this reflection, I started with contemplating what would be today's equivalent of this question, acknowledging this is thinking about stereotypes that do not always relate to reality.

Can anything good come out of ... Koondoola?

Let me make it clear, I am not bad-mouthing suburbs like Koondoola, but rather using the difference between there and here to illustrate the point. After all, I live in the City of Belmont, which also has its interesting characters and areas.

When I worked for Disability Services we used to talk about the "KGB" – Koondoola Girrawheen, and Balga; a trio of suburbs known for their families with problems and the challenges this evoked. The time I had to work with a child neglect case came out of that area. Later, when I was teaching at ECU I had a student from the area who was the only graduate from his school to go to university. He faced a range of challenges in completing his studies – isolation from his social group and the cultural differences made all the usual university challenges much more acute.

It's an area that has many of the challenges that Nazareth faced. There is poverty, high unemployment, few educational options, and many services, such as health care, are limited or are staffed by people who are using it as a stepping stone to moving up in the world. It would not be a natural place to look for a discussion on a topic that is going to stretch your mind, or challenge you to new ways of thinking about faith. Add to this, Nazareth is not in a poor area of a major city – it is the back blocks. Perhaps a better contemporary equivalent would be to ask:

Can anything good come out of Halls Creek?

That town the other end of the state with a crime rate that is through the roof and where alcohol and other drugs, at least according to the news, are rife. School attendance is best described as "poor." Domestic and family violence is rife... or perhaps less hidden than in many of our "nicer" areas. It is the sort of place where they are so desperate for workers that unless there is a requirement for registration, often workers will gain their qualifications while working in their jobs.

While the issues were different, the reactions would have been the same. Our responses to the question "can anything good come out of Nazareth" has been tempered by 2,000 years of church history. We know the answers to the question. But Nathaniel did not.

Nathaniel, on the other hand, knew quite a bit about the stereotypes of Galilee and a village like Nazareth. He would know that most of the leaders of Israel as a whole have come from Judea – near the centre of power. Galilee is not just a long way from the centre of power, it is the other side of the Samaritans and so being influenced by all the wrong people. The one who was to follow Moses should come from Judea, which was the right end of the country.

Add to this understanding of Galilee the fact that Nazareth was a small village, which probably meant an extended family group, on an out of the way hillside. The only thing it had going for it was that it was walking distance to a major Roman building site.

Nathaniel was sitting under a fig tree. With its wide, shady branches, the fig tree was the place where Rabbis taught their disciples. Sitting under a fig tree was one of the few places to escape the heat of a Galilean summer. It also became a symbol of a place of prayer. It makes sense to learn and pray in a comfortable place to reduce the distractions. It shows he is a serious learner, enquiring after God.

Nathaniel under a fig tree was learning from his rabbi when Philip interrupts and points him to Jesus. In John's version of the calling of the disciples, Jesus did very little calling. We missed out the bit where John the Baptist points out to Peter and another of his disciples "Look, here is the Lamb of God," leading to those two disciples leaving John the Baptist to follow Jesus. Peter then introduces his brother Andrew to Jesus.

This pattern is repeated soon after in Galilee. Jesus calls Philip and this is the only disciple Jesus actively calls in the Gospel (and it's worth noting there are only calling stories for five disciples and no list indicating any more, but I digress). Phillip then goes on to find Nathaniel who is only named here and at the end of the Gospel. After his initial response Nathaniel names Jesus as Rabbi, the Son of God, the King of Israel. Except possibly for "Rabbi" these are names that have lost their radical nature for our modern ears.

Naming Jesus as "King of Israel" was subversive against Rome, the power of the day. Calling him "Son of God" was similarly subversive, as that was also a title claimed by Caesar. However, these titles also tapped into Jewish thought with the true king (as opposed to the Herodian kings) being of the line of David and similarly in the coronation Psalms they were "adopted" as the son of God as they became king.

There is another point worth noting. In John's Gospel when it is an outsider referring to the people, they are typically referred to as "Jews." When it is an insider, the reference is to "Israel." So Nathaniel, who has a Jewish name that approximately means "God gives" with an emphasis on God, is one who is very much an insider. He refers to "Israel," he is a person who has spent time learning the Torah and recognises Jesus as the Messiah. Nathaniel is a character steeped in all that it is to be Jewish. Ironically, he is introduced to the Messiah by Philip, who has a very Greek name, from which we can infer a Greek background.

I think this is important to note for a later historical fact. The Gospel of John has been used to justify all sorts of antisemitism over the last two millennia. Right from the start, however, we see Israelites, Jewish people, also being faithful followers of Jesus. Whether Nathaniel was learning or teaching as another rabbi does not matter. He recognises who Jesus is.

As we finish this reflection, I am sure there are many times we have encountered God in surprising places and asked Nathaniel's question: can anything good come out of THAT place? Do we allow ourselves to be surprised with Nathaniel and let God be God – including that God can reach us from some of the most God-forsaken places in our lives or of our society? Will we, like Philip, share the news that we have found the Messiah in ways that people around us can hear?