

Sunday of Orthodoxy - Can There Any Good Thing Come Out of Nazareth?

John 1: 43-51

*From The Explanation of the Gospel of St. John
by Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria)*

43-45. The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me. Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found Him, of Whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Andrew, by listening to the Forerunner, and Peter, by listening to Andrew, both followed Christ. But it appears that Philip, without the prompting of another, obeyed Jesus at once when He said to him, *Follow me*. How was he convinced so instantaneously? It appears, first of all, that the voice of the Lord stung his soul with love. The sound of the Lord's voice was not like that of any other; for those who were worthy, it immediately kindled within them a burning love for Him. As Cleopas and the other disciple on the road to Emmaus said, *Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way?* [Lk. 24:32] Furthermore, Philip had pondered earnestly within his heart, and continuously studied the books of Moses, and was always waiting for the coming of the Christ; therefore, as soon as he saw Him, he was convinced. This is why he said, *We have found . . . Jesus*, which shows that he had always been seeking Him. Perhaps he had learned something about Christ from Andrew and Peter. Because they were of the same city, it is likely that they had talked together and discussed the Lord. The Evangelist seems to imply this when He says, *Now Philip was of . . . the city of Andrew and John*. This was a very small city, more like a village. Therefore, we should marvel at Christ's power, that from such insignificant places He chose His pre-eminent disciples. Philip does not keep this good thing to himself, but shares it with Nathanael. Because Nathanael was a diligent student of the law and knew it thoroughly, Philip refers him to the law and the prophets. Philip calls the Lord *the son of Joseph*, because they thought He was his child. And he names Him *of Nazareth*, although He was, properly speaking, of Bethlehem. He was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. Because the manner of His birth was hidden from most, while His upbringing was apparent, they called Him *Jesus of Nazareth*.

46-48. And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto Him, Whence knowest Thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

Philip had said that Christ was from Nazareth. But Nathanael, astute in the law,

knew from the Scriptures that the Messiah should come from Bethlehem. This is why he said, *Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?* Philip answered, *Come and see*, knowing that once he tasted Christ's words, he would never leave Him. Christ commends Nathanael for being a true Israelite, who said nothing either to curry favor or to cause enmity. Nathanael's words stemmed not from disbelief, but from a discerning mind well-versed in the law, which knew that the Christ would come from Bethlehem and not from Nazareth. How then does Nathanael respond to the Lord? Does he become conceited from these words of praise? Not in the least. Persisting in his desire to establish clearly and certainly the identity of this Man, he asks, *Whence knowest Thou me?* Then the Lord reveals His very divinity by speaking of things which no one could have known except Nathanael and Philip, because they had spoken and acted alone. Although He was not present, Christ knew all that had taken place when Philip spoke with Nathanael. This is why He says, *when thou wast under the fig tree*. Before Philip drew near, the Lord spoke these words concerning Nathanael, lest anyone should suspect that Philip had told Him of the fig tree and his conversation with Nathanael. At once Nathanael understood Who the Lord was, and confessed Him to be *the Son of God*. Hear what he says:

49-51. Nathanael answered and saith unto Him, Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these. And He saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

Prophecy has great power, even greater than miracles, to move a man to believe. The demons are able to simulate miracles and appear to do them. But no one can have clear foreknowledge of future events, and predict them accurately, not even an angel, and even less so, the demons. Therefore the Lord drew Nathanael to Himself by telling him the place where he had been standing, and that Philip had called to him, and that he was a true Israelite. When he heard these things Nathanael sensed the greatness of the Lord, as much as he was able to at that time, and confessed Him to be the Son of God. Yet his confession was not the same as Peter's. [See Mt. 16:16-18.] Peter confessed Him to be the Son of God, that is, true God. Therefore the Lord blessed Peter, and entrusted the Church to him. But Nathanael confesses Him to be merely a man Who by grace and His own virtue has been adopted as a son of God. This is made clear by what he says next, *Thou art the King of Israel*. Do you see? Nathanael has not yet attained to the perfect knowledge of the true divinity of the Only-begotten. He believes in Him as a man beloved by God, and as the King of Israel. If he had confessed Him to be truly God, he would not have called Him the King of Israel, but the King of all. Therefore the Lord does not bless him, as He did Peter, but corrects him, and leads his thoughts upwards to comprehend something of His divinity. *Ye shall see*, He says, *the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*. He is

saying, "Do not understand Me to be merely a man, but rather the Master of the angels." He Whom the angels serve cannot be merely a man, but only true God. All these things did, in fact, take place at His Crucifixion and Ascension. As the time of His Passion approached, an angel from heaven strengthened Him; at His Tomb there was an angel, and again at His Ascension, as Luke relates. [See Acts 1:10-11.] Some have understood the fig tree to represent the law. Like the fig, the law contains sweetness, but it is hard to get at, covered over, as with leaves, by the harshness of the legal observations and the difficulty of the commandments. They say, then, that the Lord saw Nathanael, that is, looked down graciously upon him, and knew his thoughts, while he was still under the law. Consider this interpretation as well, O reader, if you find it pleasing: the Lord saw Nathanael *under the fig tree*, that is, under the law, or, within the law, searching out its depths. If he had not been searching out the depth of the law, the Lord would not have seen him. Know this as well, that *Galilee* means "rolling down." The Lord, then, went forth to that place in this world which is sunk low, that is to say, to our human nature. And while we were still under the fig tree, under the sway of sweet sin, which is mixed with much bitterness on account of the regret and the punishments which follow, the Lover of man saw us, and chose those who confess Him to be the Son of God and the King of each one who sees God (for *Israel* means "seeing God"). Indeed, if we persevere with zeal, He will count us worthy to see greater things than these. We shall behold angels ascending to the height of divine knowledge of Him, and descending again, because they cannot know His unknowable essence. In another sense, a man ascends when he immerses himself in the study of the divinity of the Only-begotten, and he descends when he delights in the contemplation of His Incarnation and descent into hades.