

# Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2024, Epiphany 2

Readings: **1Samuel 3:1-10**  
**1Corinthians 6:12-20**

**Psalms 139:1-5, 12-18**  
**John 1:43-51**

It's another one of those Sundays where more than one reading stands out and each could form the basis of a sermon! In the Old Testament reading we hear about God calling to the young man Samuel while he was sleeping and though he didn't initially understand, after guidance from Eli, there was recognition. His final response to God, *'Speak Lord for your servant is listening!'* is one we could all learn from because I think often when we pray we invert this. Rather than *'Speak Lord for your servant is listening'* we think, *'Listen Lord for your servant is speaking!'* Maybe that's too confessional and I'm just reflecting on the way I pray sometimes?

Psalms 139 offers what I think of as a corner-stone affirmation. Addressed to God it says, *"For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made..."* Extraordinary words because we do not usually think of ourselves as being "...fearfully and wonderfully made..." we normally think of ourselves as being pretty ordinary. Worse than that we often think that we are less than ordinary because of constantly comparing ourselves with others. We're not as smart as; strong as; good looking as; wealthy as; funny as; happy as... them. But the psalm affirms that no matter our intelligence, strength, appearance, financial situation, ability to entertain, or situation in life... we are *"fearfully and wonderfully made"*.

I think this is a liberating and transformative insight for us as individuals, and at many levels for humanity collectively. Please bring to mind the person in your family, friendship circle, or workplace... that you don't get on with. It's unlikely that you think of them as beloved children of God, or even 'fearfully and wonderfully made', and much more likely that you think they are a twit and that you do not value them much at all!

Similarly, in the theological, political, ethnic, and regional groups we are part of it is unlikely that we think of those who believe and think differently to us as being 'fearfully and wonderfully made' particularly when those differences appear to be polar opposites. Our thinking and language can become adversarial and unkind and we can fall into prejudicial thinking that expects the worst of the 'other' and is blind to acknowledging goodness and common ground.

We find an example of prejudicial thinking in John's Gospel this weekend. In this a man called Phillip, who had recently become a follower of Jesus, went to find Nathanael. He explained to his friend that Jesus was an extraordinary person and that he came from

Nazareth, however, it's clear that Nathaniel did not think people from Nazareth were fearfully and wonderfully made. Instead, he said cynically, *'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'*

Phillip and Nathanael came from Bethsaida and it would seem that some people in Bethsaida looked down on the people of Nazareth. This way of thinking is not limited to first century Palestine and is alive and well today in every country. We continue to get tribal and understand our 'tribe' to be intrinsically better and have more rights than the 'tribe' next door. It's certainly present between some country towns in Western Queensland... but I'm not going to name these because the people who need to know already know! That's why the command to love one's neighbour – regardless of their 'tribe' - is so challenging and has the potential to be so transformative.

Unabashed Phillip didn't try and persuade Nathanael with reasoned debate but instead invited his friend to meet Jesus – *'Come and see!'* It's indicative of the regard that Nathanael had for Philip that he went. Perhaps he was curious about who had enthused his friend so much. Whatever the reason he went and an aspect of his character was affirmed by Jesus, *'Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'* Jesus didn't move into attack mode and challenge Nathanael's prejudice and cynicism but instead affirmed something that was good. Probably something in there for us to consider... certainly for me to consider.

In response Nathanael had a life-changing moment because he moved from being a sceptic to affirming, *'Rabbi, you are the Son of God!'* It was an extraordinary statement for a time when Roman Emperors affirmed themselves to be 'Son of God' and had this carved into the gateway arches of occupied cities and towns. For a Jewish Rabbi to be given that title would have understandably challenged the Roman understanding of things in a way that would not have been welcome.

I think the potential for us to recognise ourselves in Nathanael's attitude is significant. Is there someone, or some group, that you have a level of prejudice towards, or bias against? Can anything good come out of... that person – that place – that group that is other? It could be based on race, ethnicity, political belief, religious identity, sexual orientation... or, other things.

One month before the brutal years of the American Civil War President Lincoln suggested to the polarised States of North and South that, *'We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection...'* (First Inaugural Speech conclusion, March 1861). And one hundred years later Dr Martin Luther King suggested to a society polarised by racial prejudice, *'... when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring forward from every village and every hamlet, from every State and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men, and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join*

*hands sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual , “free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.” (I have a Dream, August 1963).*

Interesting to remember that each of these men were killed by people who did not agree with the vision they offered in which it was understood that ALL people are fearfully and wonderfully made; that ALL people are made in the image of God; and that ALL people are called to love their neighbour.

The insights about prejudice from the Psalm and the Gospel readings have the potential to speak powerfully to us in our own contexts wherever and whoever we are.

To help realise that potential I invite you to prayerfully consider the following three questions:

- Which person or group of people do you and I have prejudice towards because we understand them to be wrong?
- How challenging would it be to think of that person, or group of people, as being fearfully and wonderfully made by God?
- And, how life-changing for them, and for us, would it be if we prayed regularly for God’s blessing upon them... and got to know them better?

Would you please join me in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and for the opportunity to remember today that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Help us to recognise our prejudice towards those who are other and enable us to become more kind. We ask in the name of the one who said, ‘Love one another’, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen