

Epiphany 2 2015 Crediton

It's the stuff that dreams are made of. In the summer of 1987, I was on placement from theological college here at this church. The then Rector, Anthony Geering, sent me off to visit the sisters at Posbury. The radio was on in the car. Carly Simon had released her 14th album and there was a song that captivated my ears. It's the stuff that dreams are made of.

This last week the Church of England has released a series of documents explaining how we might turn our fortunes around again and grow, rather than decline. I don't think I recommend you read them. They are dull, and boring and currently lifeless. The only way that the Church of England is going to survive is if we can together dream a new future, and then find ways of living ourselves into the dream. Currently we only seem to be able to dream things backwards; we think that what worked for us will work for others. We've become bad at dreaming. Lots of Churches I visit are not the stuff that dreams are made of. In 1997 we were staying in America as part of a church exchange and I was invited to pay a visit to a ranch in the middle of Ohio. The owner was a very humble looking guy, but we knew from what our hosts had told us that it was not going to be an ordinary experience. For Doug Hall, the owner, is an inventor; at 38 he was no older than I was then, but was reckoned to be one of the most successful business men in the states. And why? Because Doug has the power of ideas. His ranch does not house cattle, or the means for rearing sheep, or livestock. It is not a usual kind of farm. Rather it is a farm that grows ideas. In the ranch there were computers, a library, offices, the usual kind of business deal. But in the main room at the centre there was nothing but jukeboxes, pinball machines, racing games, computer games, pool tables, sweets machines. Outside there was a lake with speedboats and jet skis, and for the timid like me, bicycles and a cycle track. Doug's idea is that business men are basically rather boring stuffed shirts. And that if they are to come up with good ideas that will sell, if they are to make their businesses grow, they need to learn once again the benefit of play, that will break down the walls that stifle real creativity. His approach is 'come and see'.

To be honest, we don't really know very much about Nathaniel. In fact in the other Gospels he is called by a different name, Bartholomew. He was the one who Philip found sitting underneath a tree. Philip told him about a man who had come from Nazareth. Someone who was very significant. Nathaniel exclaimed 'Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth. And Philip said 'come and see'. That simple phrase is the very basis of much our Christian faith. We are on a journey of discovery - of come and see.

But if we are to attract others, then what we have to present is a dream of another way of being. Church exists for two reasons. They are the same two reasons that Jesus chose his disciples. Firstly it was that they might have, through him, a better relationship with God. And secondly it was that they should have better relationships with other people. Love God, love your neighbour as yourself. That's why church exists. It's the stuff that dreams are made of. And we need to dream different ways for that to happen.

Church is not attractive to younger people because its imagination about human relationships is too limited. There is no sense of play that will lead them to embrace big new ideas. The walls between loving God and loving others are seemingly impermeable ones to the next generation. We have to dream a new future where those walls are broken down.

People often ask what the Church thinks about such and such. What is the authorised version of our opinion on something? Usually of course it is something which is potentially controversial. But authority in the Church is not really about me telling you what to do, because the Bishop has told me what to do, because God has told him what to do, to put it very crudely. Of course, authority is devolved in some sense. We are disciples. The very word implies that we are under somebody's discipline. We are disciples of Jesus Christ, and therefore, not unlike the early apostles, Nathaniel among them. We need to come and see what Jesus is about so that we can know for ourselves. But come and see isn't about telling people 'this is the way it's done'. Come and see has to be 'come and HELP US see'. If I tell you what to think, then I treat you as children. Jesus urged his disciples to be childlike - not childish. It has always been tempting for the Church to say; this is what you should believe; this is what you should think about things; this is what you must do. It was that kind of power that corrupted it so absolutely in the middle ages.

Now I do not for a moment advocate a situation where we all make up our own minds about things, and say, whatever I want to do or believe that is all right. It clearly isn't. It's a recipe for anarchy. But the glory of the Anglican Church of which we are a part is that it has encouraged enquiry. There is a shift going on in certain parts of Anglicanism at the moment that wants to wipe away the liberal thinking that has been the glory of Anglicanism. We don't dictate the answers to complex problems. We make an invitation - much the same as the invitation that was issued to Nathaniel. Come, and together we'll see. Come and help us see. But we need to make it the stuff that dreams are made of.