**Epiphany 2 17 January 2021**

**(1 Samuel 3:1-10; Revelation 5:1-10; John 1:43-51)**

Well, this is my third winter since arriving here from the balmy south, and I must admit that the novelty of all this thick snow is beginning to wear a bit thin! But I know that our organist Chris has been taking advantage of the conditions, particularly on steep slopes near his house. In home-schooling his sons he has been introducing them to the concepts of potential and kinetic energy. In other words they have been sledging!

In fact, rumour has it that Chris is the first one to slide down the slopes saying, like any good father, ‘follow me’. I imagine that in normal times Ben and Laurence and Chad would then go off to invite their friends to join in the fun, saying ‘Come and see’. Sadly, in Lockdown that’s not so easy – but the principle is there. If we discover something good we want to invite others to make the same discovery.

As we have just heard, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Follow me’. Philip then told Nathaniel about Jesus, saying to him ‘Come and see’. On meeting Jesus Nathaniel said to him, ‘...you are the Son of God!’.

What a sequence! We are looking at this story today because it is a clear example of all that the Epiphany season is about. We are celebrating the various ways that God in Christ is revealed to us. Last week, we recalled the Baptism of Christ – when the voice from heaven was heard to say, ‘You are my Son’. Next week, we will revisit the wedding at Cana in Galilee – where water was turned into wine. This was the first of Jesus’s ‘signs’ by which he *revealed his glory*. Truly, this man was the Son of God.

Jesus is saying ‘Follow me’ to us too, and he is calling us to say to others, ‘Come and see’. Our hope is that they also will acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God. So today is a good opportunity to be thinking how God in Jesus is calling *us* to follow him in his service. For most of us this will involve thinking how we can continue or develop the part we play in the life of our local church – in order that the church can make a difference in the life of the wider community. For all of us, what we do is ‘For God’s Sake’ – which just happens to be the title of a book I read recently...

The book, ‘For God’s Sake’ explores how ‘the traditional Anglican commitment to *local* prayer, presence and service can be maintained’. It may have been written before the pandemic, but its message fits perfectly to the current situation we all face: how is any parish church to meet the challenge presented by the ‘perfect storm’ centred on the ongoing effects of the virus?

A chapter of the book is written by Rowan Williams, who says, ‘The Church [both the building and the community] can’t help taking up space in the world, but it takes up space not for [its own sake but…] the world’s sake… always insisting that that space is everyone’s’.

I would suggest this echoes the relationship between the churches of our Benefice and the wider communities they each serve: Richmond, Hudswell, Downholme and Marske. Hence the vision statement: ‘a people and a place where love works’.

Rowan Williams continues, ‘…our society retains an awkward and inarticulate sense of a church-shaped gap. [So we are] there to guarantee that there is room for something not… fully… understood… [and where there is a deep desire for a…] connection [to be] kept open on everyone’s behalf.’

OK, many church buildings are currently locked, so our task is to keep open what they represent, to maintain that connection with the local community through the way we each interact with the community (whether in person or virtually).

Now Rowan Williams goes on, ‘Hence… [the Church can] touch people in their depths, [but we should be wary of] suggesting that the proper response is commitment, regular belonging… [It is tempting for the Church to] exploit contacts, force paces. [But] for a lot of people a lot of the time what matters is the basic assurance that the channels are still open…’

As we ‘do church’ primarily online these days we really have no idea who our church community now includes! But the message has to be that we are delighted people are joining us from near and far, whether ‘live or later’, and we hope that when they choose to ‘come and see’ God is able to touch them in their depths.

Rowan Williams then warns, ‘[Being wary of forcing paces] should not mean… that our identity as the Church is passive… But [attempting] to control outcomes [would only lead to panic when we fail. And such panic would be] a major obstacle to the offer we are there to make.

‘[So] asking an institution to go on supporting a practice that is detached about certain sorts of outcome, unworried about control, and hopeful rather than obsessional about growing in numbers is asking a lot…’

Well, to ‘translate’ that last paragraph, I would suggest that even in the face of the challenges caused by the perfect storm currently swirling around us we can be *confident* in who we are as the parish churches of this Benefice. But that confidence needs to be sustained by a deepening relationship with the *person* we *follow*: Jesus Christ – whose identity is the Son of God.

Rowan Williams reminds us, ‘[The presence of Jesus] changes things, alters the shape of the world – but not [by…] recruiting ‘supporters’. It is *disciples* – learners – [followers] that he invites, rather than ‘supporters’.

You will notice that the hymns today have been chosen to reflect our themes of calling and invitation – and of Jesus being the Son of God. They reflect the meaning of the whole Epiphany season which is about our experiencing afresh the presence of God in Jesus: his power, and his all-embracing love.

So, what is God calling – inviting – you to do, or to be? How is he wanting you to grow as a disciple, a learner, a follower of Jesus? How is he calling you to play a part in the work of your church: work which involves praying for, being a presence in, and serving the wider communities of Richmond, Hudswell, Downholme and Marske? And is God calling you to help someone else to hear their call: to be an ‘Eli’ to their ‘Samuel’? God won’t ever force a response, but out of our deepening love for him the time will come when we find we can simply do no other.

Please look out for details of our forthcoming online Lent courses which will give us the opportunity to learn and to grow as disciples. Perhaps we will hear again Jesus say to us, as he had said to others, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’. Incidentally, in John’s gospel these are the first words actually spoken by Jesus: ‘What are you looking for?’ May Lent be a time when we hear afresh his call to fullness of life in his service. ‘Come and see’.

Thanks be to God. Amen.