



SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY

March 13

THE GOSPEL READING

John 1:43-51

[The Baptist's Disciples Follow Jesus]

At that time, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. And he found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and he said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

THE SERMON

The Son of God took on human flesh for our salvation. He entered the world in order to redeem it. Following Christ's temptations in the wilderness, He begins His public ministry and presents Himself to John the Forerunner to be baptized. John bore witness of Him saying, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29).



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Two of John's disciples, the brothers Andrew and Peter, follow Jesus in response to the testimony of John the Baptist.

These disciples become eyewitnesses of the Glory of the Messiah Who was revealing Himself, as He said to them, "Come and see!" (John 1:39). The Lord was gathering His disciples, who were also calling their friends and families to tell them about Christ. The Lord finds Philip and says to him, "Follow me." This is a simple yet powerful *invitation*. In His love, Jesus calls Philip to fully give himself to God to the point where all other aspects of life become secondary. This invitation to become His disciple is also personally addressed to each one of us.

The Lord says to us, "Follow me!" When we soften our hearts to God and realize that He is calling us to be with Him every day, we naturally respond in love. The Lord comes to us, the distinct persons we are, with full knowledge of who we are, where we come from, and everything that relates to us as individual human beings. His *invitation* opens the door for us to respond to His Grace. Philip responds positively and follows Christ. Eventually, he becomes the Apostle Philip, one of the Twelve, who devotes his entire life to serving Christ and is ultimately crowned with martyrdom. When we respond to the Lord's call to *follow* Him, He will lead us to live full and meaningful lives, as we live for Him and bear lasting fruit both in our own lives and in the lives of others.

After responding to the *call*, Philip finds Nathanael and tells him he has seen the Messiah about Whom the Law and the Prophets had spoken. The Grace of God opens Philip's heart so that he could perceive the true identity of Jesus: He is the prophesied Messiah Who came to save the world. Philip overflows with joy and *invites* Nathanael to join him. Nathanael wonders, how can the Messiah come from such a little-known town like Nazareth? Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, as the Prophets had spoken, but He grew up in the small village of Nazareth, humbling Himself for our sake.

Philip then repeats the words of the Lord: "Come and see." Jesus sees Nathanael coming to Him, and He says of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Nathanael's heart did not have any deceit. Because he had an openness for God, God the Son reveals Himself to him. But Nathanael is stunned, and he asks, "How do you know me?" Jesus answers him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." The encounter could not be more personal. Jesus knows Nathanael's heart intimately, and He even sees Nathanael from a distant place, without having encountered him before. The Lord knows everything about us. He sees us and longs to be with us, even when we have a false impression that we are alone and forgotten. He is always with us.

Nathanael responds in faith, saying, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" The disciple's heart is filled with joy and the Grace of God, and his lips confess the divinity of Jesus, the Messiah standing in front of him. Saint John Chrysostom says, "Do you see how his soul is filled at once with exceeding joy, and embraces Jesus with words? ... How he leaps and dances with delight? So ought we also to rejoice, who

have been thought worthy to know the Son of God.”

Jesus answers him, “Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” In the Old Testament Book of Genesis, we read that the Patriarch Jacob dreamed of a ladder connecting earth to heaven, upon which the angels were ascending and descending (Genesis 28:12-15). Jesus is this ladder as He unites in His Person both divine and human natures. Christ is speaking of His mission to provide the missing link for humanity, recombine earth and heaven, and reconnect heaven to earth, as it was in the beginning. Christ is the ladder, the ladder which is placed before us and which we are all called to climb. Everything we do in the Church revolves around this ascension of man to God, which was enabled by God taking on flesh and descending from heaven to the world. He descended for us to ascend. In this way, Nathanael beholds the God-Man in the fulness of His purpose. As the disciple embarks on a life of discipleship, he will see greater things than what he just saw. Eventually, Nathanael would see the Lord risen from the dead, bestowing on all of us eternal life.

Nathanael and Philip encounter Jesus personally. In His love, He calls them to follow Him. By opening their hearts to Him, they respond in a positive manner to the call. This changes their lives forever. The words “follow me” are received by them as the Word of God, He Whose identity they recognize, as the sheep recognize the voice of the Shepherd. This is also true of us. Christ is the center of our faith. Just as Philip and Nathanael, we are encouraged to also open ourselves to Who He is and what He came to do. He is Perfect God and Perfect Man. He is the Messiah, the Christ. He is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity Who has no beginning and no end. He comes to us in love, taking up human nature to unite us forever to God.

The nature of Christ is expressed dogmatically in the Creed we recite at every Divine Liturgy when we affirm that, He is the “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father through Whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man.” The divine light of Christ illuminates Philip and Nathanael. We also pray in the Liturgy, “For You, Christ our God, are the illumination of our souls and bodies, and to You we offer up glory, together with Your Father, Who is without beginning, and Your all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.”

Christ *calls* to us personally. It is up to us to respond to His call and bear witness of His presence in the world, just like Philip and Nathanael did. When we ourselves decide to come and see, and then invite others to do the same, we begin to be transfigured into living icons of Christ. As we commemorate the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we reaffirm the sig-

nificance of icons for our faith. In the Church, you can find many holy images depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, the angels, or the saints. Although icons are created by molding earthly materials, they can be venerated because God took on human flesh and entered the material world. We venerate icons but worship only God. Let us continue our journey to Pascha by responding to His call in our own life. Let us open ourselves to Christ, let us open ourselves to receiving His Body and Blood, which was shed for us to bring us back to His Kingdom. Let us make the Kingdom of God the most important goal in our life because, in the end, being with Christ is what truly matters.

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