

Beginnings

John 1:29-51

John's record of this portion of the Gospel history captivates our interest because it reminds us of other small beginnings that have grown to greatness. On display before us is the infant church in its cradle, the small headwaters of the River of Life, the earliest blossoms of the Christian faith, the humble origin of the mighty empire of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All new things are more or less unknown. But in comparison, none were ever more obscure than the beginnings of Christianity. Imagine this first meeting of Jesus of Nazareth with five humble men - Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and another unnamed person. What an insignificant event in the history of the church, not to mention the world! It actually seems almost too trivial to be found in the Gospel narrative. For we do not have in this situation a formal, solemn call to the great office of apostleship. Nor do we see Jesus beginning to spend uninterrupted time with His disciples. The most we can say is that certain individuals were becoming acquainted with Jesus and were putting their faith in Him, and that they subsequently were giving their full attention to Him, ultimately becoming Apostles of His religion. It should not be surprising that there is no mention of these events in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

Instead of being surprised by the silence of the first three Gospel writers, we ought to wonder why John (the author of the fourth Gospel) thought it was worthwhile to record these seemingly unimportant incidents after so many years had lapsed, especially since they stand so close to the majestic sentences with which his Gospel begins. We are prevented from such surprise by reflecting on the truth that insignificant facts may be very important to the feelings of those who are personally involved. What if John himself was one of the five who became acquainted with Jesus on this occasion? That would make a huge difference between him and the other evangelists. They would only know of these events second-hand (if they knew them at all). It would not be surprising that, until his last breath, John remembered with emotion the first time he saw the Incarnate Word and considered the smallest recollection of that time unspeakably precious. First meetings, as well as last ones, are sacred. This is especially true when they are followed by a profound history and are accompanied by signs foretelling the future. Such signs were not lacking in connection with the first meeting between Jesus and the five disciples. Did John the Baptist not first give to Jesus the name "Lamb of God," which was an exact description of His earthly mission and

destiny? Was not Nathanael's doubting question, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" a forewarning that the Messiah would face a conflict with unbelief? And did Jesus not give a wonderful sign that a new era of miracles would be performed by divine grace and power when he offered the promise to this godly, though at first doubting, Israelite: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"? (John 1:51).

So, John, the writer of the fourth Gospel, really was the fifth unnamed disciple. This is certain. His way, throughout his Gospel, is to use a periphrasis (a roundabout way of speaking) when alluding to himself. Sometimes he would even leave a blank where his name should be. One of the two disciples who heard the Baptist call Jesus "the Lamb of God" was John himself. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was the other.

The impressions we receive from these little anecdotes about the infancy of the Gospel are, indeed, meager when compared with the emotions which were awakened in the heart of the aged Apostle as he remembered these early events. However, it would be no credit to our intelligence nor to our piety if we could read this page of Gospel history unmoved, as if it were totally devoid of interest. We should study this simple story with the same kind of feeling that people have who make pilgrimages to sacred places; for indeed, the ground is holy.

John the Baptist

The scene where these events took place was in the region of Peraea, on the banks of the Jordan near the Dead Sea. The people who appear on the scene were all natives of Galilee, and their presence here is due to the fame of the remarkable man who had the distinct honor of being the forerunner of the Christ. John, surnamed the Baptist, had spent his youth in the desert as a hermit, living on locusts and wild honey, and clothed in a garment made of camel's hair. He had come out of his solitude and appeared to the people as a prophet of God. The essence of his prophecy was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In a brief time, many were attracted from homes everywhere to see and hear him. Most of those who flocked to his preaching left without being changed. But many were also deeply impressed. These confessed their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River. Some of the people from this group became the disciples of John the Baptist. At least two of the five men mentioned by the evangelist (John) were a part of this group. Previous conversations with the Baptist had awakened in them a desire to see Jesus and prepared them for believing in Him. In his communication with the people around him, John made frequent allusions to the One who would come after him. He spoke of this coming One in language designed to awaken great expectations. When he referenced Him, he called himself a mere voice in the wilderness, crying, "Make ready the way of the Lord" (Matt. 3:3). At another time he said, "I baptize you in water for repentance; but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not even fit to remove His sandals" (Matt. 3:11). This great One was none other than the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel.

These messages were most likely to result in the disciples of the Baptist leaving him and going over to Jesus. John intended for this to happen. We see here the process of transition actually commencing. We do not maintain that the five men mentioned here left the Baptist at this time to become, from this time on, the regular followers of Jesus. But an acquaintance has now begun which will result in that. The bride (the disciples) is introduced to the Bridegroom (Christ), and the marriage will come in due time, not to the disappointment, but to the joy of the Bridegroom's friend (John the Baptist).

How easily and naturally does the mysterious bride, represented by these five disciples, become acquainted with her heavenly Bridegroom! The account of their meeting is elegant in its simplicity and would only be spoiled by commentary. There is no need for a formal introduction. They all introduce each other. Even John and Andrew were not formally introduced to Jesus by the Baptist; rather, they introduced themselves. When the desert prophet saw Jesus, he exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The next day, he repeated it in an abbreviated form (John 1:36). It was an involuntary statement from one who was absorbed in his own thoughts, rather than the conscious speech of one who was directing his disciples to leave him and go over to Jesus. The two disciples, on the other hand, in going away to the Person whose presence had been so impressively announced, were not obeying an order given by their old master. They were simply following their feelings which had been awakened by all they had heard him say about Jesus on both occasions. They did not need for someone to command them to seek the acquaintance of One in whom they felt so interested. All they needed was to know that this was He. They were as anxious to see the Messianic King as the world is to see the face of a prince.

The Character of the Five

It is natural for us to scan the Gospel narrative to discover the character of those who, in the way so notably described, met Jesus for the first time. Little is said of the five disciples, but there is enough to show that they were all religious men. What they found in their new friend indicates what they wanted to find. They evidently belonged to the select group of people who were waiting for the consolation of Israel and anxiously looked for Him who would fulfill God's promises and satisfy the hopes of all devout souls. Besides this general indication about their character shown in their common confession of faith, a few other facts about these first believers in Jesus are given in order to help us become better acquainted with them. Certainly, two of them - probably all of them - had been disciples of the Baptist. This fact is decisive as it pertains to their moral earnestness. Only spiritually earnest men were likely to come from John's influence. For if the followers of John were at all like him, they were men who hungered and thirsted after real righteousness, and who were sick of the righteousness then in vogue. They agreed in their hearts with John's withering exposure of the hollowness of the people's religious professions and of the worthlessness of trendy good works. These men longed for a purity other than the superstition and pretentiousness of the Pharisees. Each one's conscience acknowledged the truth of the prophetic oracle, "All

of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Is. 64:6). And they prayed fervently for the revival of true religion, for the coming of the divine kingdom, for the advent of the Messianic King with a fan in His hand to separate the chaff from the wheat, and to put right all things which were wrong. Without a doubt, these were the feelings of those who had the honor to be the first disciples of Christ.

Simon Peter

Simon, the best known of all the Twelve and better remembered as Peter, is introduced to us here by the prophetic insight of Jesus. The good side of his character is emphasized when he is referred to as the *man of rock*. When this disciple was brought by his brother Andrew into the presence of his future Master, we are told that Jesus “looked at him, and said, ‘You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas’” (John 1:42). In Syriac, Cephas means the same thing that Petros signifies in Greek. The penetrating glance of Christ discerned that Peter had latent capacities of faith and devotion which were fundamental to ultimate strength and power.

Philip

The evangelist does not explicitly tell us what kind of man Philip was; only from where he came. From our current passage of Scripture, and from other texts in the Gospels, it can be concluded that he was a deliberate man, slow in arriving at a decision. For proof of this view, consider the way in which he described his first encounter with Jesus to Nathanael. But Philip’s words, and all that we read about him, rather suggests the idea that he was an earnest inquirer after truth who thoroughly searched the Scriptures and made himself acquainted with the Messiah of promise and prophecy. To him, knowing God was the *summum bonum* (the highest good). In Philip’s concern to win his friend Nathanael over to the same faith, we recognize a generous, sympathetic spirit which is characteristic of sincere inquirers. Later, this same spirit would be revealed in him when he brought the request from devout Greeks for permission to see Jesus.

Nathanael

The description of Nathanael, Philip’s acquaintance, is more detailed and more interesting than any of the other five. And it is quite surprising that we are told so much here about this one whom we otherwise know almost nothing. It is not even certain that he belonged to the circle of the Twelve. In all probability, however, he is to be identified with Bartholomew who is mentioned in all the Gospel accounts. His full name was Nathanael the son of Tolmai. In favor of this supposition is the fact that the name Bartholomew comes immediately after Philip in the lists of the Apostles. Nonetheless, we are confident that Nathanael was a man of great moral excellence. No sooner had Jesus seen him than He exclaimed, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47). These words suggest the idea that his heart was pure. There was no double-mindedness, impure motive, pride, or unholy passion. He was gentle and meditative. His mind

mirrored heaven like the blue sky on a still lake on a calm summer day. He was a man who was addicted to habits of devotion. He had been engaged in spiritual exercises under a fig tree just before he met with Jesus. So we are justified in concluding these things about him from the deep impression made on his mind by the words of Jesus, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (John 1:48). Nathanael seems to have understood these words as meaning, "I saw into your heart and knew what you were thinking about; therefore, I pronounced you an Israelite indeed." He accepted the statement made to him by Jesus as evidence that He had supernatural knowledge. Therefore, he immediately made the confession, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel" - the King of that sacred commonwealth of which you say I am a citizen (John 1:49).

It is remarkable that this man, so highly endowed with the moral dispositions necessary for seeing God, should have been the only one of the five disciples who displayed any hesitancy about receiving Jesus as the Christ. When Philip told him that he had found the Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth, he skeptically asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). We usually do not expect such prejudice from one who is so meek and amiable. Yet, on reflection, we perceive it to be quite characteristic. Nathanael's prejudice against Nazareth sprung, not from pride (as in the case of the people of Judea who despised the Galileans in general), but from humility. He was a Galilean himself and as much an object of Jewish contempt as were the Nazarenes. His inward thought was, "Surely the Messiah can never come from among a poor, despised people such as we are - from Nazareth or any other Galilean town or village!" He timidly allowed his mind to be biased by current opinion, even though those thoughts originated in feelings with which he had no sympathy. This is a fault common to men whose piety, though pure and sincere, defers too much to human authority, and who, therefore, become the slaves of ideas totally unworthy of them.

While Nathanael was not free from prejudices, he showed his guilelessness in being willing to have them removed. He came and saw. This openness to conviction is the mark of moral integrity. The guileless man does not assert opinions without proof; he investigates, and therefore always comes to the right conclusions. The man who has a bad, dishonest heart, on the other hand, does not come and see. Believing it to be in his best interest to hold fast to his opinions, he diligently avoids looking at anything which does not tend to confirm his predetermined conclusions. He may profess a desire for inquiry, like certain Israelites mentioned in the same Gospel. Even though they may be different than Nathanael, they would share with him the prejudice against Galilee. "Search and see," these Israelites said with guile. They were responding to the candid question from the honest, but timid Nicodemus: "Our Law does not judge a man, unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" (John 7:51). "Search and see," they said, appealing to observation and inviting inquiry. But they added: "no prophet arises out of Galilee" (John 7:52). This statement immediately prohibited inquiry, and suggested that it was

unnecessary. "Search and see; but we tell you beforehand that you cannot arrive at any other conclusion than ours. We warn you, you had better not."

The Belief of the Five

Such were the characters of the men who first believed in Jesus. What was the amount and value of their belief? One's first impression is that the faith of the five disciples, except for the brief hesitation of Nathanael, seems unnaturally sudden and mature. They believe in Jesus on a moment's notice, and they express their faith in terms which seem appropriate only to advanced Christian intelligence. In this first chapter of John's Gospel, we find Jesus called not only the Christ, the Messiah, and the King of Israel, but also the Son of God and the Lamb of God. These names express to us the cardinal doctrines of Christianity: the Incarnation and the Atonement.

The haste and maturity which seem to characterize the faith of the five disciples are only superficial appearances. As to their haste: these men believed that Messiah was to come sometime; and they greatly wished that it might be then, for they felt He was greatly needed. They were men who waited for the consolation of Israel, and they were prepared at any moment to witness the advent of the Comforter. Then the Baptist had told them that the Christ had come, that He was to be found in the Person whom he had baptized, and that His baptism had been accompanied with remarkable signs from heaven. What the Baptist said, they implicitly believed. Finally, the impression they had of Jesus when they met Him tended to confirm John's testimony which was worthy of Christ.

The appearance of *maturity* in the faith of the five is equally superficial. As to the name "Lamb of God," it was given to Jesus by John, not by them. It was, so to speak, the baptismal name which the preacher of repentance had learned by reflection, or by special revelation. He gave it to Christ. Even he did not comprehend what the name signified. The fact that he repeated it showed that he was only a learner working hard to get up his lesson. And we know that what John understood in part, the men he introduced to Jesus, now and for long after, did not understand at all.

The title, Son of God, was given to Jesus by one of the five disciples as well as by the Baptist. Years later, the Apostles still found the title sufficient to express their mature belief in the Person of their Lord. But it does not follow that the name was used by them at the beginning with the same fullness of meaning that it would have at the end. It was a name which could be used in a literary sense which fell far short of that which it is capable of conveying, and what it did convey in apostolic preaching - merely as one of the Old Testament titles of Messiah, a synonym for Christ. Without a doubt, it was in this rudimentary sense that Nathanael applied the title to Him, whom he also called the King of Israel.

The faith of these men was, therefore, just what we would expect from beginners. In substance, it amounted to this: they recognized in Jesus the Divine Prophet, King, Son of Old Testament prophecy. Its value did not lay in its maturity, or accuracy, but in this: that however imperfect, it brought them into contact and close fellowship with Him. In His company they would see greater things than when they first believed, one truth after another assuming its place in the firmament of their minds, like the stars appearing in the evening sky as daylight fades away.