

SCALE HOW "MEDITATIONS."

Dominus Illuminatio Mea.

No. 7.

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THE CALL OF PHILIP AND NATHANAEL.

(S. John, chapter i., verses 43–51.)

We have seen in the call of the first two disciples and of Peter two of our Lord's most winning characteristics—His accessibility: He appears to be always at leisure for any who would see Him, always open to demands upon His service. In His words to Peter, again we notice the complete sympathy which is the only key to perfect appreciation of character. It is as if the one consciousness were projected into the other and a life-history read at a glance.

(v. 43.) As the narrative goes on we have more opportunities of seeing how our Lord deals, not with men, but with each man on the fully recognised basis of his personality. "On the morrow." This is the fourth day that the Evangelist describes minutely, day by day. No wonder! We could all write at great length of the first two or three days of our stay in a new country. S. John does something more. He, an aged man, writes of the intense impressions he received upon entering, not a foreign country, but a new life. "He was minded to go forth into Galilee." Nothing is casual or unimportant in the narrative. He was *minded*. This first Galilean circuit was part of the *intention* of His ministry. Had he sought for advice, no doubt it would have run:—"Remain in Judea, for there are the Jews and the Christ is to come as King of the Jews. Go to Jerusalem, for there are the learned and religious among the people; they will give a hearing to a prophet." But in this journey to Galilee we have the first indication of the fulfilment of the Baptist's witness that Christ came to take away the sins of the world. He was brought up as a Galilean, his apostles were Galileans, much of his ministry was performed in Galilee because, we may believe, Galilee was a connecting link between the Gentile world and the Jews—"Galilee of the Gentiles"—the province was inhabited by a mixed race planted here by the conquerors when the Jews were carried into Babylon—"the people that walked in darkness saw a great light."

"He findeth Philip and saith unto him, 'Follow me.'" That is all; we are not even told that Philip obeyed—that is a matter of course. But how full is the brief narrative. We have another example here of our Lord's prescience and full recognition of the man He is speaking to. We give commands only to those of whose obedience we are assured. Here no preliminaries were necessary. Philip waited for no revelation of himself. He stood as a soldier "at attention," waiting the word of command.

(v. 44.) His preparedness is, in some measure, accounted for by the words which follow—"Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter." Perhaps these young men had talked often one with another of that "expectation of the Jews" which was at hand. The news of the momentous interviews with which his friends had been honoured would find in

him an eager and acquiescent listener. Just so did he find it in his heart to believe in the Messiah. In every age of the Church, and not least in our own, there have been saints of God waiting with childlike simplicity for the Word; they hear and they follow, because their hearts are already prepared for the mandate which shall give order and purpose to their lives.

(v. 45). [sic] "Philip findeth Nathanael." Observe, not one of these first disciples can keep the new joy of his life to himself. He must find someone else to share his gladness. "Love and a fire cannot be hid," and this is true, above all, of the love of Christ. This is no treasure which we can contain without imparting. The secret will out, perhaps in words to a chosen friend here and there, perhaps it may be our vocation to tell that which we know to many. But if we say no words at all we shall assuredly betray that we have been with Christ by the "sweetness and light" which the countenance of our Lord has shed upon us. Then follows Philip's confession of faith, one more *credo*. We do not know which to admire most, the tact or the courage of his approach to Nathanael. His friend is a scholar, a student of the scriptures, who would at least exact that the best known predictions of the prophets should be fulfilled in the Messiah. Philip announces with conviction, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write," for this was the appeal which would reach his friend; and yet in the same breath he admits that two of the most familiar Messianic prophecies are *not* fulfilled in the man whom he calls the Christ. Every Jew knew that out of Bethlehem should come the Messiah,¹ and that His birth should be unique among men, for "behold, a *virgin* shall conceive and bring forth a son."² The attitude of this new disciple is instructive to us. He does not evade the difficulty, nor slur it over, nor explain it away. He states on the one hand what would seem to him the irreconcilable difficulties, and on the other, his conviction, which is untouched, altogether unaffected by difficulties which to a Jew must have seem insurmountable. This man came forth from *Nazareth* and was the son of *Joseph*, born like any other man, the son of a father. If we will receive it, there is a further lesson for us here, for the "doubts" which Philip faced so valiantly were begotten of his ignorance. Jesus did in truth come forth from Bethlehem and was the son of no earthly father. Some day, perhaps, we shall know that all the doubts, which intervene between the Light of the World and the hearts of men whom He would comfort, are born of our limitations and will vanish in the light of fuller knowledge, even of fuller scientific knowledge. Philip meets the reward of his faith. His friend does not find these two mountains of difficulty insuperable, another lesson for us as to the force of conviction. The point Nathanael raises is an unexpected one. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" easy-going, pleasure-loving Nazareth, conceivably a sort of Naples of the East, a city beautiful for situation, set upon a hill, where every man sat under his own vine and his own fig-tree, where the beautiful children played as they play to-day among the oleanders, and red anemones, and swing gaily as they do to-day among the branches of the trees. To this objection Philip's sufficient answer is, "Come and see;" and one hears the relief in his tone that this should be the only question raised by his friend. One is struck by the illustration of the offices of friendship presented by this group of young men, and we shall perhaps not go beyond the letter or the spirit of the narrative if we derive from it an infallible test of friendship which deserves the name only in so far as friend leads friend to the more perfect Way. One other reflection occurs to us. It is often spoken of as a mark of our Lord's condescension that He was born among peasants, though these were of kingly race, that He grew up in a cottage home in Nazareth, and that He chose His first disciples for the most part from a band of young fishermen of the peasant-proprietor class. But in the

light of modern sociology we begin to learn that these are precisely the preferable conditions of life for a fine and enduring physical development and for vigorous and untrammelled intellectual force. We could cite numberless illustrations from the great men of the hour, but perhaps another hill country whose peasant-born sons have distinguished themselves all over the world will make the point clear. Such names as those of Carlyle and Sir James Simpson carry conviction. In this, as in other things, our Lord was never exceptional. He followed and indicated a rule of life.

(v. 47). [sic] "Jesus saw." The regards of our Lord are always especially dwelt upon. He looked and He saw. In a more simple and perfect state of being we should all doubtless communicate with the eye instead of with spoken words. Christ saw and looked and read, with the perfect intuition which we have seen Him exercise before, the whole gamut of the character of Nathanael from its foundation "an Israelite" to its individual development "in whom there is no guile." He recognised that exceeding subtlety of mind which descended upon every Jew from his father Jacob and which—even when combined with the piety and godward tendency that made the Jews the elect of the earth as holding for men the secrets of God—was not always without guile in its dealing with men. But there have ever been Jews with the spiritual insight, intellectual power, and moral perceptiveness of their nation, who are free from the hereditary tendency and are guileless as a child. Such a Jew offers a singularly beautiful type of character and such a Jew our Lord saw in Nathanael.

(v. 48). [sic] He, with the astuteness of "an Israelite indeed," did not allow the pleasure of being so fully recognised to carry him away. "Whence knowest thou Me." How do you know this? was his query; and our Lord's reply, enigmatical and unmeaning to any other listener, pierced his soul and told him that he was in the presence of the great Revealer who alone knows what is in man. "Before Philip called thee, when thou was under the figtree, I saw thee." Every Jew had his place of prayer, be it the house-top or the closet, or, in our Lord's case, the mountain-top; or his own figtree trained probably into a bower. There is that in each of us which is our very best, better than our acts or words or our good resolutions,—our aspirations. The suffusion of consciousness in Nathanael would seem to show that Christ had surprised him in aspirations after the highest which he could disclose to no man: we may well believe that his thought had been of the coming One, for it is according to our desires, even according to our aspirations, that God deals with us. He knew himself to be in the presence of the Revealer of secrets, the Judge who came not to condemn but to show to every man the best that is possible to him, the unsuspected good that is in him.

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(*S. John, chapter i., verses 49, 50.*)

(v. 49). [sic] Another *credo* follows. "Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of

Israel.” In this narrative we have the distinction between that intuitive perception of character which belongs to all sincere and simple persons, including children and “savages,” as well as to the wise and learned who have still the grace to be simple, and that divine attribute of our Lord’s whereby He is the revealer of men to themselves and the revealer of the Father to His children. A true and simple man might have pronounced that Nathanael was an Israelite without guile; only the Omniscient was with Nathanael under the figtree.

(v. 50). [sic] More light is ever the reward of those who see. Nathanael receives the promise of fuller revelation. “Ye,” not only Nathanael, but Philip, “shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The allusion to Jacob’s ladder was perfectly familiar. The exquisite story had doubtless touched the hearts of both men. That was exactly what their hearts hungered for—a ladder, a bridge, a means of constant communication and commerce between God in heaven and man on earth, whereon the angels should come and go; and Christ promises to unfold the mystery of His two-fold relation, His close brotherhood with man, and fellowship with God, which should bridge over all sense of distance and lift men as upon a ladder to their Father in heaven.

¹ Micah v., 2.

² Isaiah vii., 14.