

## First Witness

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1st Hymn: (T Maryton H.P.Smith 1825-98) *by Oliver Wendell Holmes 1809-94*

- 1) Lord of all being, throned afar, Thy glory flames from sun and star,  
Centre and soul of every sphere, yet to each loving heart how near.
- 2) Sun of our life, Thy quickening ray sheds on our path the glow of day;  
Star of our hope, Thy softened light cheers the long watches of the night.
- 3) Our midnight is Thy smile withdrawn, our noontide is Thy gracious dawn,  
Our rainbow arch Thy mercy's sign, all save the clouds of sin are Thine.
- 4) Lord of all life, below, above, whose light is truth, whose warmth is love,  
Before Thy ever-blazing throne we ask no lustre of our own.
- 5) Grant us Thy truth to make us free, and kindling hearts that burn for Thee,  
Till all Thy living altars claim one holy light, one heavenly flame.

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### Prayer:

Dear Father, as we join in worship today, we thank you for the great “cloud of witnesses” who precede us. In some mystical way we still engage in our common delight – to bring praise and glory to your name. So enable us, Father, in this joint act, and lift our hearts to worship rightly. We pray in Christ’s name, Amen.

### Reading:

- Ps 89:34-37
- John 1:29-51

### Intercessions:

Dear Father, as your servant St. Paul urged his young protégé Timothy in his letter of encouragement we are glad to pray for your world, and those in leadership that they might seek a will greater than their own, for your wisdom that comes from above, in order that your servants everywhere may experience a quiet and peaceable life and know a sense of order which glorifies you. We are quite aware that the opposite is the experience of so many in the world, especially where regimes of cruelty and abuse of power reign.

We pray for Ukraine and the ongoing invasion. While the rest of the world feels the injustice of it, we pray the aggressor may know the increasing ineffectiveness and failure of aggression as the God of Righteousness brings to bear His power in that place. Continue to bless all the assistance being offered from around the world and strengthen the people of that land and their leader to trust you and to persist in their battle.

Wherever your faithful servants struggle against injustice and persecution because of their trust in you, make their testimony strong and effective, and bless them in the midst of their suffering and bring glory to your name. May many come to trust in Christ through their witness. For we pray in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn (T Cym Rhonda John Hughes) by William Williams 1717-91

- 1) Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak but Thou art mighty, hold me with Thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.
- 2) Open Thou the crystal fountain whence the healing stream shall flow;  
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through;  
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer, be Thou still my strength and shield.
- 3) When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of deaths and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side:  
Songs of praises, songs of praises I will ever give to Thee.

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Address: First witnesses

Much of the first chapter of John's gospel is about what John the Baptist said of Jesus, making clear that He was the Messiah, knowing that he had been sent to identify Him and announce Him to Israel. Making it clear that he was not himself the Messiah, he claimed to be the "voice of him crying in the wilderness..." of Isaiah. He was led by the Holy Spirit who gave him the assurance that he was the fulfilment of that prophecy. He also made clear to the Pharisees who sent priests and Levites to him to be certain of this man's intentions, that he was "that voice", and different from the ministry of the One he was announcing, who would have a quite different baptism and a totally transforming ministry.

When he saw Jesus approaching, he spoke out "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". In that short sentence he summarised the whole of the ministry of Christ. He claimed no "special knowledge" of him but rather said he did not know who Messiah was until the Spirit who sent him pointed him out, and told him how to recognise the Messiah – it would be "the one on whom the Spirit descended and then remained" – that is the one who would baptise in the Holy Spirit. So like the prophets of the Old Testament era, John was familiar with the Holy Spirit and his leading, and he was obedient to the leading of the Spirit. The next day, John was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus approached, and for the second time John said "Behold the Lamb of God" and the disciples followed Jesus who saw them following, and asked "What do you seek?" They did not answer that question, but rather asked "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus' answer was to say "Come and see". They did so, and stayed with him all that day.

Near the end of the life of John the Apostle, he himself says of that time these disciples asked Jesus where he was staying, John remembered for all those years that the very hour Jesus answered was 10.00am in the morning (presuming Roman time), so we can conclude two things – that that hour was etched permanently in John's memory, and that John the Apostle was one of the disciples who stayed with Jesus all that day. In fact he was never to stop following Jesus!

And the other disciple was Simon whom Jesus looked at and renamed Cephas (i.e. Peter).

On the following day Jesus planned to go to Galilee, where he found Philip, a resident of a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee. In John's gospel Jesus said only two words to Philip – "Follow me". It seems Philip was totally convinced that following Jesus was what he would do – maybe for the rest of his life. He was convinced enough to speak to Nathanael and to tell him "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph! Nathanael was scathing, replying scornfully "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" In Israel Nazareth was an insignificant village, really a tiny town in a "backwater" district, rather a lowly beginning for Israel's Messiah! (Of course everything about Jesus' birth and early life was "insignificant" to the people who "mattered" in those days. The world today hasn't changed much – people can be quick to make a judgment according to origin, race, suburb of residence, name (including heritage if descended from someone of high rank or family), schooling, and finally profession! What was the likelihood that a lowly carpenter from an "irrelevant" village in a "backwater" of Israel, and brought up poor, would be a person of any importance in the affairs of men? In the world of relevance Jesus would not "get a guernsey" would he? But God's valuation is so different from ours!

But the importance of this event had not been realised. Philip was very wise in his reply. He made no judgment at all – but simply said "Come and see". I can think of no answer which would have brought such a good result. Because as Nathanael approached, Jesus made a comment which greatly surprised Nathanael. He said, in reference to Nathanael "Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile". This suggested that Jesus knew Nathanael, yet Nathanael had apparently never met Jesus. So Nathanael was very surprised! He asked Jesus "How do you know me?" and Jesus answered "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you".

This astounded Nathanael. He had I presume no previous event in which his private life could have been known by Jesus by experience. Yet Jesus seemed to have surprisingly personal information about Nathanael, even to the very understanding of his character. Nathanael had probably already heard something about this Rabbi who was being heard increasingly around Israel, but he had never met Jesus before. Immediately Nathanael realised something about Jesus. He was convinced on this brief encounter that this man's understanding was not explicable on the usual casual contact, nor even standard human judgment! Jesus had manifested a wisdom and knowledge which was a sign of who Jesus really was. Nathanael had a moment of inspired revelation – this Jesus knew things that only God could know.

In that flash of time Nathanael knew that Jesus was not just a passing wise man – he had God-like knowledge! By that action of the Holy Spirit within him Nathanael burst out with the greatest revelation till then in Jesus' ministry, and one of the greatest confessions of John's gospel – "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel!"

It was Jesus' turn to be surprised – nowhere else in Jesus' whole ministry was there any greater confession of the truth that this one of Nathanael. (Later Peter was to confess "we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God"(Jn 6:69), when Jesus asked the disciples if they also wanted to go away, because

thousands had left him.) Astonishingly Nathanael had had virtually no time to consider the importance of what he had just confessed.

The text of John includes no indication as to what Jesus thought of Nathanael's confession, but I suspect Jesus was delighted and probably thanked his Father for this revelation. His next comment, though, pointed to his delight because it contains awareness of the speed and importance of Nathanael's declaration, as well as the tiny amount of evidence that convinced Nathanael. None of the 12 disciples ever manifested such faith nor so fast! And we have many examples of Jesus' delight in seeing faith. I think there is no greater example of faith, and the brevity of the time it took to be convinced, anywhere in all the gospels.

We who live with constant availability of the Scriptures, abundant time to read them, and any number of helps to understand them, along with God's special gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, have a responsibility of taking seriously this privilege, and honouring God in believing them. How few in Christendom have anything like as good an opportunity as we have been given? We should rejoice in so priceless a gift. And then witness to the truth received. The results of such belong entirely to the Spirit's ministry. Amen.

### 3rd Hymn: T Diademata George Elvey 1816-93 *by Matthew Bridges 1800-94*

- 1) Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne;  
Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own;  
Awake my soul and sing of Him who died for thee,  
And hail Him as Thy matchless King throughout eternity.
- 2) Crown Him the Lord of life, who triumphed o'er the grave,  
And rose victorious in the strife for those He came to save;  
His glories now we sing who died, and rose on high,  
Who died eternal life to bring and lives that death may die.
- 3) Crown Him the Lord of love; Behold his hands and side,  
Those wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified:  
All hail, Redeemer, hail! for Thou hast died for me;  
Thy praise and glory shall not fail throughout eternity.

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### Benediction:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.

[This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh \(M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.\) for HopeNet SA](#)