

Come and see

Sunday 15 January 2017

Introduction

Lord, may your Spirit of truth and love fill our hearts, so that we may recognise the power of your Word and truly live our lives to your praise and glory. Amen

I'm sure everyone has had that feeling at some point – I'm not sure what I'm looking for but I'll know what it is when I find it. Or, I don't know who he is but I'll know him when I see him. Well this morning's reading takes us through this experience as seen first through the eyes of John and then through the eyes of the disciples. So I'd like to take you through these narratives and then explore the implications for our own lives.

First, please imagine that you only know John's gospel. You're not aware of Matthew, Mark or Luke so you have not heard the account of Jesus's baptism by John in the Jordan which we listened to last week. So in this pure Johannine world, the story so far is (unsurprisingly since this is John's gospel) very simple and very complex. The opening passages of this first chapter are very well known to us, we heard them on Christmas morning. In the beginning was the word, the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory. The next passage talks about John's testimony verses 15-18:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

And because of this testimony John comes to the attention of the authorities who send priests and Levites to find out what is going on. Who are you? They ask. And John makes it clear that he is not the One. No I'm not the Messiah, I'm not Elijah and I'm not a prophet. But, and I paraphrase here, I'm looking out for him, I'll know him when I see him and that person I'm telling you really is the Messiah.

So at the point where we start our reading this morning, we know that John has already got into trouble for his preaching, we know John knows who he is and he knows who he is looking for. Therefore for the readers, the opening sentence of our reading is like a thunderbolt. John sees Jesus coming towards him and says: "Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "This is the One". The One I've been telling you about. This is the person on whom God's spirit rested. I've seen it happen and I am witness to it.

And John – John the Baptist that is - goes through a number of stages in his revelation of Jesus. He is aware that he is the forerunner for the Messiah, he recognises Jesus then as the Lamb of God, a phrase he repeats the following day when he is again at the Jordan, this time with two disciples (whose story we will return to in a minute). And then later on in John's gospel, in chapter 3 we read again of John the Baptist's fuller testimony about Jesus in which he speaks of Jesus as the Son of God. (verses 34 – 36)

For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God^[i] gives the Spirit without limit. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

So for John the Baptist, the full meaning and significance of the person he was looking for, the person he knew he would recognise when he saw him, is gradually revealed over time, with a richer appreciation of its importance at each stage.

For two of John's disciples, though, the experience was rather different. They had been following John, presumably listening to his preaching, maybe assisting him in baptisms. So when John turns to them and for the second time says, look, there is the Lamb of God, they are clearly intrigued. You can imagine them thinking to themselves, What is all this about? What is so special about this man. Maybe there was some discussion amongst themselves, what do we do now? Do we stay or do we go? In any event, they decide to take the first step to finding out more and leave John to follow Jesus. And Jesus at some point clearly becomes aware of their presence and turns to ask them the million dollar question: 'what are you looking for?'

But they, perhaps unsurprisingly either can't or don't want to articulate their answer so instead reply with a different question – where are you staying? You can perhaps envisage this being asked in a rather sheepish, embarrassed way – not brave enough to answer properly. Like someone trying to hide how much they really are interested but are too scared to show it. But Jesus goes right to the heart of the issue and says simply 'come and see'. An invitation. An offer of an opening. A prospect of discovery.

And, you might think actually amazingly enough, the two disciples accept, follow him to where he was staying and spend the rest of the day with Jesus. These two men, unsure of what they were looking for, interested enough to leave John the Baptist to try to find out more about this man John called the Lamb of God, discover something in him sufficiently compelling to stay the day

with him, listening to his teaching rather than go back to work or to their friends. It was only after that that Andrew goes straight to his brother and says 'we have found the Messiah'. The time spent talking to Jesus was enough to convince him that John the Baptist was indeed right: this Man was the Lamb of God, this Man was the one John was telling everyone would come. He was the Christ, the Son of God.

Again, rather as with John the Baptist himself, a gradual process of realisation, of revelation. Not the Damascus road experience of Paul, but highly evocative of the Emmaus road encounter at the end of Luke's gospel in the first appearance of the Risen Lord to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. An experience that strongly parallels this event at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. On that occasion, walking with Jesus (whom they did not recognise) and talking with him, listening to his teaching, they ask him to stay with them – 'Stay with us, for it is towards evening' – and it is only then in the breaking of bread that they recognise that he is the risen Christ.

So what can we learn from the experience of John the Baptist, from the disciples who responded to Jesus' invitation to 'come and see'? The first point I think is hopefully a very reassuring one – these experiences show that it doesn't have to be a blinding flash of revelation, a Damascus road epiphany, a coup de foudre lightning bolt ... If that is what we are looking for, it may happen, but it is not the only way to come to find what you are searching for. It might instead be a long process, a slow awakening, a gradual awareness.

At the same time, possibly more like the disciples than John the Baptist, we need awareness that we are looking for something (or someone) even if we

don't know what that, or who that, is. Consciously or unconsciously we put ourselves in a position, or a mindset, to be open to finding, even if we are not fully aware that we are looking (if you see what I mean). Recognising that you have found what /who you are looking for, does not always start with a conscious decision to search, but rather the realisation at the end that you have what you seek.

And thirdly, I think that it shows to us that Jesus is always there, inviting us in, making the offer to us to find out more, to stay a while and talk. Asking questions, discussing teaching, breaking bread are an intrinsic part of the search, of exploring and of finding. We may not have been aware that we were looking, or that we needed, this wonderful miracle of love, grace and truth present in the Word Incarnate, but we know when we find it, when we realise that He was with us always, offering his hand to us, if only we are willing (perhaps brave) enough to step forward.

And as faithful disciples it is our calling also to offer to talk, to stay a while, to tell stories to those who are unsure, who are timid, who are looking even perhaps unconsciously to learn. In giving of ourselves in this way we are also giving glimpses of the Spirit of God, of the love of God and the truth of God.

So, as we as a community of faith welcome strangers and friends to begin the search, the exploration for knowing more about Jesus, whether through the Alpha course, through home groups, through conversation over coffee (or a beer), may God's Spirit inspire us, may God's grace encourage us and may God's love be reflected in us.

Taking the first step can be very daunting. Asking the first question can be very challenging. Realising that someone is searching can be the most difficult of

all. But we can be reassured that the Risen Lord is alongside us every step of the way.

A prayer to end:

Lord, help us be open to others, give us the awareness to listen to what they really ask, the wisdom to have the words to speak to their hearts. May your spirit of truth and grace fill us with the confidence to convey your word, that we might reveal your love and glorify you in all we do. Amen