

come and see!
 a sermon preached on the
second sunday after epiphany
 19 January 2014
 at
st john's
 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
 by *dr muriel porter, hon. parish reader*

the lections: Isaiah 49: 1-7, Psalm 40: 1-14, 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9, John 1: 29-42

Today we have switched from Matthew's Gospel to that of John – the most theological of all the four gospels. And in this Gospel we meet Jesus not as a baby but as a man, about to embark on his ministry.

Who is this Jesus? John the Baptizer already knows – he is the Lamb of God, no less. He is the Messiah, the one who has come to redeem his people. More, he is the “Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world*” – a description that will only make sense after Jesus' death and resurrection. We say or sing these words at every Eucharist: this is the Lamb of God who redeems us – forgives us, pardons us – at the very depth of our being. He became what we are so that we might become what he is. And as if “Lamb of God” were not a sufficient indicator of Jesus' identity, John goes on to proclaim him as Son of God. John declares that he has seen the Spirit of God descending *and remaining* on Jesus.

So we are standing on very serious ground indeed in this first meeting with Jesus on the banks of the River Jordan. The whole Christ event is effectively mapped out for us before we have heard Jesus speak a word. This is the context in which John portrays Jesus beginning to gather disciples around him.

Such a different story from the Sunday school version, isn't it? That version is based on the account of the calling of the disciples in the other gospels. You will remember they all locate the calling by the Sea of Galilee, as the first disciples leave their boats and their nets to follow Jesus and fish for people.¹ In John's Gospel, they are not in Galilee, and they are not even identified as fishermen at that point. His first followers in this account are disciples of John the Baptist, who follow Jesus at the Baptist's prompting.

And in this account, Jesus does not actually call them to follow him. Here is no call to leave their boats, their businesses, their homes and their families. Instead, Jesus seems to be walking on ahead of them. He turns to them. “What are you looking for?” he asks. “What are you looking for?” Their response – “Rabbi, where are you staying?” – indicates that they have at least recognised that Jesus is a teacher, from whom they might learn something. It was customary for rabbis to gather disciples together for instruction, and that, initially, is what these disciples seem to be seeking – his schoolroom.²

But as always with John's Gospel, there is something more going on here. They are not merely enquiring about location. Literally in the Greek, they ask him,

¹ Matt 4:18-22; Luke 5: 1-11; Mark 1: 16-20

² Francis J Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina Series vol. 4, Daniel J. Harrington, ed., Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press 1998), p.54.

“Where do you *abide*?” They are seeking nothing less than who Jesus really is. We know the answer to the disciples’ question, from our familiarity with the rest of John’s Gospel. Where does Jesus abide? Jesus *abides* in the Father, and his call to his followers is to come and *abide* in him. The same word was used earlier, when John said that he saw the Spirit of God descending from heaven and remaining on – *abiding with* – Jesus.

Professor Dorothy Lee, a friend of this parish and a noted scholar of John’s Gospel, sees great significance in this word “abiding”, which occurs 40 times in this Gospel. She writes:

In John’s understanding, the love of Father and Son ripples out from the divine being to embrace human beings and indeed all creation in a relationship of abiding. Resting in that love is the meaning of salvation for John: it denotes the life of heaven and draws the community of earth into its orbit. Becoming children of God in this Gospel – being restored to the divine image – means returning to that primordial love and resting-place which is the ground of creation.³

So Jesus’ reply to these two enquirers to “come and see” is nothing less than a gracious invitation to them to move deeper and deeper into the life of God. It is not a call to any specific role or task, but rather to relationship.

In this Gospel Andrew and the other disciple are not invited to fish for people, but to enter into relationship with Jesus. It is qualitatively different. And it is actually central to any meaningful ministry. Unless they draw close to God, no amount of “fishing for people” will be really effective. The “fishing for people”, or any other specific ministry task or role, only has value if it is an outworking of their love for their Lord, and their ongoing relationship with him. It is the same for us.

To be called into relationship—to be called to follow—is to enter into an open-ended mystery, to launch out into uncharted waters, not knowing what if any actual tasks we might be called on to do. Jesus simply says, “follow me.” He calls us first to himself—to a personal intimacy and shared life. Like all relationships, it must be nurtured, through prayer and pondering the Scriptures, through regular worship and participation in the Eucharist, even when at times the relationship might feel arid or distant or puzzling. We must continue to trust that that relationship is secure – that we really do abide in God, and that God abides in us. What follows from that relationship is secondary, and not up to us. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it:

If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer the question we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey’s end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship is joy.⁴

Those first disciples were not called to go somewhere or do something in particular – they were called to go anywhere Jesus might lead. As they follow him, they begin the momentous journey of discovering for themselves who he truly is. Just as we do, as we follow him. Unfortunately because we live in a society that insists that for anything to be valuable, it has to produce something concrete and measurable, we usually start looking for some specific task we are called to do, or role to adopt. If we

³ Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2002, p.88

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, © SCM Press 1959, Touchstone edition, New York, 1995, p.38

cannot discern anything obvious, we assume we really have not been called at all. We lay people often think that because we are not called to ordination, then we don't have a call from God. It is so easy to forget that the primary calling of all of us, lay or ordained, is into relationship with God. That relationship was inaugurated in our baptism, when we were "marked as Christ's own forever" and "brought out of darkness into [God's] marvellous light".⁵ How easy it is for us to forget not just who Jesus is, but who – and whose! – we are.

We actually know, in our everyday lives, that nothing is more important than relationship. Our jobs, our community positions, our homes, our possessions, everything else pales into insignificance beside the people that matter to us. It is something that is brought home to us powerfully at times of crisis, when we either have lost everything or fear that we might. Australians who have anxiously watched the approach of bushfires this past week of nightmare heat would know only too well that only their loved ones really matter.

Jesus has called us into relationship with him, and goes on calling us throughout our lives. He keeps inviting us to come and see what next he has in store for us. He does not leave us to our own devices, or to depend on our own strength - thank God! First he invites us to share his very life at this table, the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation to sustain us for that mysterious journey to which he calls us – *all* the food and drink we will need.

Come and see!

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⁵ Service of Holy Baptism in *A Prayer Book for Australia*, The Anglican Church of Australia Trust Corporation, published under the imprint of Broughton Books, Sydney, 1995, p.60.