

Sermon 19/01/2020 – “Come and See!”

Prayer

It's always fun when the sermon is based on the lectionary – it usually means a little slice of gospel cut from a bigger story! Today's little slice really begins 500 years earlier with the words and prophesies of Isaiah, continues 10 verses before our gospel reading, and logically finishes 9 verses after we stopped! Let's see what we can learn for our lives today from this snippet at the very start of Jesus' ministry.

Our gospel reading starts “The next day...” which rather begs the question what had happened the day before?? The Jewish authorities had a problem! Out near Bethany, on the banks of the Jordan, was a preacher who was causing a real stir! He was preaching a powerful message that all needed to repent (that is recognise their own sinfulness), be baptised (washed clean), and prepare for the coming of the Messiah – all not particularly radical messages; their problem was that he had emerged not through official channels, but from left-field – there was no official sanction for this message!

There was at the time quite a bit of expectation that the Messiah might soon appear – was John claiming to be he? Was he Elijah , or the “prophet like Moses”? who many held would appear at the coming of the Messiah? So the Pharisees come and ask John outright – are you the Messiah, or Elijah or the prophet? ‘No’, he replies, I am “A voice” – he makes no claim to be anyone – simply a voice – a voice preparing the way for one who will totally eclipse his ministry – “the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie”. [Untying the masters sandals was the job of the lowliest slave – John recognises that his position is even lower.]

And so we come to the start of the reading – “the next day....” John sees Jesus coming towards him. We have, I think, to understand that the baptism of Jesus, which we heard about in last week's account from Matthew, had already taken place. John has already sussed out who Jesus is, and wants his disciples to recognise him as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” His listeners would immediately have related to this picture of the lamb[– the lamb that God provided to Abraham when his obedience and faith were tested with young Isaac; the lamb's killed and eaten at the first Passover; and indeed

the lamb described by Isaiah who was led to the slaughter for the sins of God's people. The lamb, or scapegoat, on whom the sins of the people were placed, and who was then cast out into the wilderness to carry away them away, would be a familiar picture to his listeners.]

But there is also something deeply counter-cultural and challenging in here – the Messiah, the lamb, is not there just to take away the sins of the individuals, or of the Jewish nation, he is to take away the sins of the world! We don't have time to fully unpack today's old testament reading, but hear what God is saying to his "Servant": "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

This was a radical challenge for all of John's listeners, and especially the established ruling Pharisees – not only was John bringing a message from outside their own structures, and foretelling the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, but he was openly declaring that the Messiah was for everyone, not just the Jewish nation! Yes, it was all foretold in their scriptures, but their minds were closed to the full meaning and the implications – no wonder they were worried – it was a message which challenged their existence and very reason for being!

And so our reading moves on to the following day, and Jesus is once again passing by as John notices him, and then surprisingly points him out to two of his disciples. I say "surprisingly" because I don't doubt that John knew the likely reaction of the disciples. Two men who had been important followers and co-workers of John, promptly get up and follow Jesus. It's characteristic of John's humility that not only does he describe himself as simply "a voice", but then willingly passes on two of his most trusted helpers, [Andrew and an unnamed disciple, widely held to be John the Evangelist (the gospel author) himself. I'm quite sure John saw their potential, yet he sends them on their way!] John's reaction to recognising Jesus was to hand on the very best resources he had in service of the Messiah!

So off they go, following Jesus, and then he turns and asks a really simple, yet deep, question, "What do you want?" And their response I suspect, is one of instant slight embarrassment - "Oh, er... , where are you staying?" they blurt out! Seriously, do we really

think they wanted an address? And Jesus, his eyes no doubt brimming with love, and probably laughter, says what he says to each of us “Come, and you will see!”

There are three very important steps here – first we have to be prepared to be clear what it is we are looking for, then we have to come, and only then will we see.

What would you say were Jesus to turn to you and ask “What do you want?” Why are you here this morning – what are you looking for? Sooner or later we all need to ask ourselves that question if we want to take Jesus seriously. What are you looking for? – a hero to model life on? A sort of heavenly slot machine to fix the problems that are too large and too complex? A friendly arm to lean on in the walk of life? Or someone who will stand in the full blaze of the father’s glory, who will shield you from the heat of God’s presence and justice, and who will respond with utter love and compassion – “I will pay the price – I will lay down my life and my glory for you, my scruffy child”!

We’d better get that clear in our heads because the next step is even riskier – “Come” he says. Take my hand and step out into the darkness – trust me to be your guide. You have a choice – you can draw back, stay safe on this bank of the river, attend church, say prayers, read the bible, practice religion, and yet not take the step forwards and actually follow his leading. This was where the Pharisees were – standing on the edge of the river, but unwilling to step out. Knowing about the messiah, yet not actually knowing him as he stood before them.

And the promise is in the last part, because if we will take the step and “Come”, then Jesus tells us “and you will see!” This is not a promise of easy satisfaction, of instant reward for stepping out – but it is a promise – you will see!

My own experience has been that I see much better when I look back! At the time the journey can seem confusing, challenging, even painful. But when I look back I can see God’s hand shaping me, refining character, and moulding me. Most of you have heard my testimony – how God called me through the loving passion of two special leaders on childhood camps, and in doing so awoke my passion for the way marriage can be a visible beacon of God’s love; how my years of being bullied for my faith has sharpened my realisation of how important companions on the journey are – of how spiritual loneliness can suck the joy out of life; how learning about God’s Tzedakah, his combination of justice

and generosity, has called me to experience the love of giving, to reach out with love and hospitality to the unlovely of this world, which has brought meaning and richness to my life.

And what is the response of the two disciples? Well in one case we don't know, but in the other, Andrew's, case we do; as our gospel says: "The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus."

I love this bit of the story! In two simple sentences we learn of possibly the greatest legacy in earthly terms that anyone could give to the church! Andrew simply tells Peter that they have found the Messiah, and Simon Peter, the rock on whom Christ will build his church, is recruited as the third disciple! What an impact Andrew had!

There are some important lessons for us here too. Andrew didn't set off to evangelise the town, or to preach on a street corner, or write a book – he started right at home, with his brother! Do we think that we need to be "out there" before we have actually spoken to those closest to us? Our husband, wife or partner, our children, our wider family, are an important mission field – they need to hear the good news first and foremost.

And we have already established that people were already anticipating that the Messiah was imminent – so the message "we have found the Messiah" is relevant to the zeitgeist of the times. Andrew already knew what Peter was looking for – he understood that every good Israelite was longing for the Messiah, so his message is simple and to the point – no long biblical exegesis, no complex theology – just a simple statement – we have found what you are looking for!

And why did Peter listen to Andrew and respond? Well probably first and foremost because he trusted him – he's known him all his life, and when Andrew makes such a bold claim – well Peter was almost certain to respond, and to want to "Come and See"! And why was Andrew so convinced himself, well because his old teacher, John the Baptist had already told him his testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One." John had seen and believed, and Andrew trusted John's word.

So here we have, in just a few short verses, a whole model for evangelism!

First we have to start by asking ourselves the simple question Jesus asked: "What do you want?" If we are really honest and are able to say that we are looking for the Messiah, the anointed one, the one who can save, and heal us, and give us life for ever, then Jesus answers "Come and See".

"Coming" will mean stepping out in faith, not just attending church or reading the bible, but being prepared to actually put your hand in Christ's and to step out and to go where he leads. He doesn't promise it will be fun or easy – but He does promise not to let go, to walk with you every step of the way.

And if you do, and especially when you look back, you will "See". You will see his hand at work, you will see how he is transforming your life one step at a time.

And his call on you is to share that journey with others, especially those closest to you. They probably already trust what you say, but the important thing is that you share your story just the way John did with Andrew, and the way Andrew did with Peter.

Your story is unique – only you can share it with conviction, only you have the combination of friends, colleagues and circumstances to reach out to others – if we don't live it and share it, then the message will be lost. How you live, your integrity, a life aligned with God's word and love, will bring authority to your message. As Nietzsche (the most famous God doubter) famously said: "Show me you are redeemed, and I will believe in your Redeemer!" Let your life and your words speak with conviction that "You have found the Messiah", the one foretold throughout history who is anointed by God as his lamb, who has come to be the sacrifice in our place, and in so doing redeemed us from our sin.

So as I close I would ask you to just reflect on one question, the one Jesus asked Andrew, and he now asks you: "What do you want?"

[1 minute pause]

Are you following the command to "Come?" Look back - can you see where and how he is leading?

[30 second pause]

Who are you going to tell?