

**John 1: 29-42**

Have you recently had the experience of walking along the street and having the feeling that someone is following along behind you? It happens from time to time doesn't it – and usually we turn around and recognise a friend or family member trying to catch up with us. Or maybe we turn round and it's someone we don't recognise following after us and then that raises a question as to why.

Jesus has that kind of moment in this morning's gospel reading. He senses that there are two people who have started to follow him. So he turns round. What do you want? he asks. Or in another translation, What are you looking for?

What are you looking for? I suspect they don't quite know. However, what these two characters do know is that up until now they have been following John the Baptist – a rather austere and eccentric prophet in the wilderness. But now John has told them that Jesus is someone who surpasses him – someone greater, someone who offers more. And so the two of them leave John behind and, maybe a bit sheepishly and without permission, tag along behind Jesus because they are looking for something more - even if they can't quite say what that something is.

What are you looking for says Jesus. Well, erm, where are you staying they reply? Come and see says Jesus. And so they come and stay with Jesus for that day.

What are you looking for? It's very human to be looking for something more in life. We are not easily contented and satisfied, but are creatures that are always seeking something or someone who surpasses what we have experienced so far. Maybe in January especially that something more is getting in shape through a new diet or gym subscription; maybe it's a new hobby or exploring a new relationship which is going to give us something extra in life... All of these have their place.

Or perhaps we are thinking on a different level. Maybe what we are looking for is a sense of belonging and connection or for personal strength to face an uncertain future. Or a way of living at peace with ourselves and with those around us despite the knowledge of our individual and collective human failings and their consequences. Maybe, like those two characters in our reading and like me, you have the suspicion that the something more in life you're looking for has got something to do with Jesus, If so, he invites us Come and see, stay with me, spend some time getting to know me.

So as a way of doing that this morning we are going let John the Baptist introduce Jesus to us as we look at our gospel reading. And at the beginning of our reading John the Baptist wants to get our attention. Look! He sees Jesus coming and he says: Look! God's Lamb who takes away the world's sin.

The lamb would have been familiar to John's Jewish hearers as a sacrificial animal, an animal that would be slaughtered as a sacrifice to deal with sins and to restore relationship. But it may still feel a bit odd for John to talk about a human being in those terms, to point to a man walking towards them and say "Look, God's lamb". Probably we are expected at this point to make a connection, to follow a kind of hyperlink in our minds back to the prophecy of Isaiah. Because the prophet says these words about God's chosen servant: He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

And so here at the very beginning of Jesus' story we are encouraged to recognise that he is God's chosen servant who will suffer and die sacrificially. He will accept suffering as God's lamb, the one God himself has provided to take away sin. Nothing is more fundamental about the way we relate to Jesus than this. We may be amazed at Jesus as a great healer and miracle-worker, we may acknowledge him as a spiritual teacher. All to the good. But we are missing the point unless we see in Jesus that humble, servant figure, willing to suffer and die to take our sins upon himself. Jesus, Lamb of God.

Some years ago now I was at an extended family gathering on a Sunday lunchtime. In the course of conversation we mentioned that we had been to church in the morning and that led a fairly young child present to ask why did we go to church. And while I was fumbling around for what I felt would be an age-appropriate answer to that question, a family friend who was there, a Roman Catholic lady, chipped in by saying "They go to church to get their sins forgiven". At the time that answer felt a bit jarring to me and I'm still not sure that I would express myself in quite that way. But there is a truth there. Because it's true that I need to come to church to hear as we heard earlier in our service today that gospel promise of forgiveness of sins through Jesus proclaimed week by week. I rarely arrive for worship without some consciousness of the ways in which, as we say in our confession sometimes, I have wounded God's love and marred his image in me. I need to meet with Jesus and I need to meet with him as the Lamb of God who takes away sin. In the Christian life, I suggest, we will never get beyond that humbling but joyful experience of receiving God's forgiveness through Jesus.

Jesus calls us this morning to come to him for the hundredth time or the thousandth time – or even maybe for the first time – to receive the forgiveness of our sins and the peace with God made possible because he was willing to suffer and to die for us as the Lamb of God. Whatever our personal history may be, setting aside our excuses and explanations, we can come to Jesus simply because he calls us to come. In the words of the hymn:

Just as I am, without one plea  
But that thy blood was shed for me  
And that thou bidd'st me come to thee  
O Lamb of God, I come.

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There is though something further we do well to note though about what John the Baptist has to say at this point. John had carried out his ministry in the tradition of the great prophets of Israel, calling them to repentance and national renewal. We might have expected him to proclaim Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away Israel's sin and prepares Israel for the future blessing which God has in store. But no. Jesus, says John, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is an amazingly wide and generous promise, this is a staggeringly audacious claim – here is the man who will die a sacrificial death not just to deal with Israel's sin, not just to deal with the sins of certain individuals but to take away the sin of the world.

Because sin is not just a problem for us as individuals. As a whole human race and as a whole created order we face in sin an insidious, vicious and aggressive enemy. Yes, we see its effects in the bad choices we make at an individual level and in the relationships that are not what they should be. But we also see sin magnified, writ large in our sometimes depressing and sometimes heartbreaking news bulletins. Often we like to think that if only we had a bit more education or if only we can achieve the next step in technology our problems as a human race will go away. But they never quite do, because education and technology – for all their unquestioned importance - don't deal with that most fundamental flaw in our humanity, sin.

But Jesus comes as that humble servant, oppressed and afflicted, the one willing to suffer and die as God's lamb. He dies so that we as individuals can know forgiveness and he dies so that we can know that the sin of the world has been taken away – that the destructive power of sin will not have the final word over God's good creation. One of the NT writers assures us, "he Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" – but then adds in case we think it is just about us – "and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

At the very end of the Bible in the book of Revelation we are given a glimpse of the worship of heaven where Jesus in glory is seated on the throne of God receiving the worship of a redeemed humanity and of the whole redeemed created order. And the heavenly song of praise to Jesus is this: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain. The glory of Jesus is that he was led like a lamb to the slaughter to take away the sin of the world.

But there's something else which John the Baptist thinks is important for us to know as he introduces Jesus to us. In v 32 he says, "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 baptise with water told me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come

down and remain / stay / abide is the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit" I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One, this is the Son of God."

Jesus is the one on whom God's Spirit remains, stays, abides. God's Spirit had of course been active throughout the history of Israel, in particular inspiring the Old Testament prophets. But there was a sense in which the Spirit would come upon people for a particular purpose and then depart. In a similar way we would want to acknowledge today that there are moments in our world when God's Spirit is active for a time through all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds. But with Jesus it is different. The presence of God's Spirit in Jesus is unique, definitive. The Spirit has come upon him and the Spirit is staying put with him. Remaining, abiding. And this is the mark of God's Chosen One, God's Son – the one in fact for whom the whole of John the Baptist's work has been preparing. I honestly didn't know who it was going to be said John, but now I have seen – I have seen the Spirit come down and remain on / stay on Jesus – he's the one.

It's clear that John the Baptist is referring here to the moment when he had baptised Jesus in the river Jordan. As we heard in our gospel reading last week, Jesus comes up out of the water and hears God's affirmation of him "This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well pleased" and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove. And from this moment – the moment when the Spirit comes upon Jesus and stays on him – Jesus' kingdom of God mission begins. For Jesus It's a moment of affirmation and as it were loving embrace from God the Father. It's a moment of calling and vocation. It's a moment of empowerment.

But the good news is that, although this presence of God's Spirit with Jesus is unique, although it is first and foremost an experience for him, Jesus does not simply receive the Holy Spirit for himself. Because, says John, Jesus is the one who passes on the gift of the HS to others. He will baptise with the Holy Spirit. The basic idea of baptism of course is of dipping or submerging something in water. And in a hot and dry middle eastern country (which is quite difficult for us to imagine as we shiver in church this morning) life-giving water was often used as a symbol of God's life-giving Spirit. And so to talk about being baptised in the Holy Spirit has a particular appropriateness. John has baptized people with water for repentance but Jesus will surpass John, will offer that greater gift of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

We too can be immersed, dipped, baptised into this experience of the presence and life-giving power of God's own Spirit. But this is only possible for us, because of Jesus. He is the one who baptizes with the Spirit. We look to Jesus in faith and it's because of him that we are enabled to share that experience of the Spirit that first and foremost is his.

I thought we might explore that idea a little more as we draw our thoughts to a close by thinking about an apparently insignificant word in our reading but a word which becomes very important if we continue to read through this particular gospel so I think is worth a bit of attention. John the Baptist has said that the one he was looking for was the one on whom God's Spirit remains or stays. And if you recall at the beginning we thought about the two characters who started to follow on behind Jesus asking where are you staying? Jesus invites them Come and see and so they go and stay with him for that day. It's the same word in the original language – the Spirit stays on Jesus and the disciples are invited and come and stay with Jesus.

Being invited to stay with people is a familiar experience for many of us isn't it. We have some friends who have invited us as a family several times to come and stay with them and spend some holiday time. It's been a lovely experience enjoying their company and the good food and wine they provide. One bonus about these stays however is that these friends live out in the country where there is a bit more room and they have an extension to their house with a pool. So when we go and stay with them the pool becomes available to us. At the end of a hot summer day it's lovely experience to be able to dip yourself into the pool and feel refreshed and renewed. But obviously we can only do it when we've come to stay with these friends – that's what makes the pool available to us.

Jesus calls us to come to him in faith to stay with him in trust and obedience – and when we stay with Jesus a wonderful new experience becomes available to us. Clearly not access to a swimming pool, but the much more amazing experience of being immersed, dipped, or in other words baptised in God's Spirit. For some of us that may happen as a dramatic experience – like diving straight into a pool – for others it may be a slow and gentle process – like easing ourselves slowly and cautiously into the water. But if we have come to Jesus in

faith, if we are staying with him in trust and obedience we can be sure that God's Spirit is at work in our lives. And so like Jesus at his baptism we too can receive a new sense of calling and vocation to live life in God's presence and with his priorities in our hearts. We too can be empowered to do God's will, fulfil his purposes and stand against the things which contradict his love. And we too can know the embrace of the Father's love and his word of acceptance and affirmation over our lives. Because Jesus is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.

What are you looking for? was the question we started with. What's that something more, something greater in life that we are seeking? Maybe we are concluding that the answer to those questions has something to do with Jesus. If so let's be encouraged this morning that we are on the right track because he is the one who surpasses any other, the one who offers us what no one else can. Let's come in faith to the one who is the Lamb of God and stay in trust and obedience with the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.