

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 17th January 2021
Second Sunday of Epiphany

Collect

Eternal Lord,
our beginning and our end:
bring us with the whole creation
to your glory, hidden through past ages
and made known
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Revelation 5:1-10

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

John 1:43-end

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

Sermon by John Richardson

In the days when we were free to roam the shops of our choice, which I am sure will return again before long, you may remember how shop assistants would approach you and say “Can I help you?” or “What are you looking for?”

This can be rather annoying, especially when it happens repeatedly and all you want to do is browse what’s on offer - perhaps not even looking for anything special.

Of course, they are only doing their job and you might feel put out if they didn’t ask! But when it happens several times, you may decide you’ve had enough and go elsewhere.

Sometimes it helps if someone says to you: “What are you looking for?”

I’m thinking particularly of our search for meaning and purpose in our lives. And I’m thinking that so often the church - by which I mean all of us - does not ask that question of people who are searching. Instead of asking them “What are you looking for?” we present them with a set of propositions in a kind of take it or leave it attitude. This is what discipleship is all about. This is what it means to be a Christian. If you don’t like it you can lump it.

How often do we ask people what it is they are looking for? Because there is no doubt that when people are exploring the idea of faith and God they are looking for different things.

- perhaps it is an explanation as to what life is all about:
- perhaps it is an understanding of human nature with all its vicissitudes:
- or maybe it’s simply a reason for believing in God:
- or an understanding as to why the world is so often characterised by evil and wrongdoing and suffering:
- perhaps an understanding as to why there is so much goodness in the world - when it is so often concealed by our obsession with bad news and the worst side of human nature.

Lots of questions - all of which begin with the question: “What are you looking for?”

The beginning of John’s Gospel is full of questions.

They are questions about who Jesus is.

And the answer to that question tells us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

So - who is Jesus?

If you look at today’s Gospel reading and a few verses before it, you will find there no less than seven different titles for Jesus:

Lamb of God
Son of God
Rabbi
Messiah
Son of Joseph of Nazareth
King of Israel
Son of Man

Is that confusing, or not?

I have no intention of trying to explain what each of these titles means. We are familiar with all of them even if we are not quite sure what they mean.

What these titles do suggest is that there is something here for everyone.

Whatever it is we are looking for, and for whatever reason we are looking for it - we will find it here in the Gospel story and in the life and work of Jesus.

Perhaps that sounds a little simplistic to suggest that we might find the answer to any question we might ask here in the Gospels. When faced with all the questions that confront us in our complicated and confusing world, how can we possibly say that we will find all the answers here?

Of course we will not find all the answers here. What we will find here is some very simple ideas about how we might live our lives if we choose to do so. In choosing to do so we will be asked to put into practice some very simple ideas - not least of which is the idea that it's a good thing to love God and one another. If we can start with that then lots of other things will fall into place and we will begin to see what it means to live a life of faith in God.

So instead of thinking about all those theological titles John gives us - think instead about some words we find in some previous verses to today's Gospel.

John and two of his disciples meet Jesus and that same question with which we began comes up again:

"What are you looking for?"

Instead of answering the question they ask Jesus where he is staying.

He says: "Come and see."

I suspect Jesus is not just saying: "Come and see where I am staying."

He's saying: "Come and see what this is all about."

"Come and find out what it means to be one of my disciples."

And this same invitation occurs throughout the Gospel story:

"Come and see what is happening."

"Come and see what the love and power of God can do."

"Come and see what can happen when love is put into practice."

And then in today's Gospel those same three words occur: "Come and see."

When Philip tells Nathaniel that he has found the one spoken of in the law and by the prophets - Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth - Nathaniel is sceptical - "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Philip says "Come and see."

This time it's not Jesus saying it, it's a disciple.

And that's where discipleship begins.

It is our response to those who may be searching for God and for some kind of meaning to their lives.

It is about the ways in which we ask them - not directly but more by the way we live our lives: "What are you looking for?"

It is about the ways in which we say to them - not directly or using those words - but again by the way we live our lives - "Come and see."

This week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

It is worth reflecting on what it is that unites us as Christians.

It is surely our belief in Jesus and our faith in God.

And if we ask: "Who is this Jesus?", the answer is there in the Gospel.

It is in the Gospel that we discover the special relationship Jesus has with God.

And it is that special relationship which enables us to understand who Jesus is.

What we personally think about who Jesus is will determine how we express discipleship in our own lives.

If we want to see how that works in practice we need look no further than what is going on around us now.

The way in which the majority of people have responded to the Covid 19 pandemic is evidence enough that there is much love and goodness at work in our world. If there is one thing that we will remember about this period in our history, it will be the love we find all around us, expressed in so many different ways.

Wherever there is need and loss and sorrow and suffering we will find the great commandment in action.

It is there that we can begin to help people find an answer to the question:

"What are you looking for?"