

## Sermon – Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018 – 9.30 am

It is sometimes said that seeing is believing. In John's gospel in particular there is an important connection between seeing and believing. This morning we are told that some Greeks want to see Jesus. They approach Philip, the disciple with the Greek name, and say, quite simply, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Do you remember right back at the beginning of John's gospel when the first disciples were called? First, two disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus where he was saying, and the response was "come and see". Then, when Philip invited Nathanael to meet Jesus and Nathanael gave that wonderful response, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", Philip's response was "come and see."

There is a close link between seeing and believing that winds its way through John's gospel. And if we put ourselves in the place of the religious establishment for a moment, we can understand the threat implied in the desire of these Greeks to see Jesus. The Pharisees have watched this unknown Galilean appear on the scene and challenge their authority. Turning water into wine, healing on the Sabbath, breaking the usual social conventions by speaking with women and most recently raising Lazarus from the dead. In the verse before this morning's reading, the Pharisees exclaimed: "Look, the world has gone after him!"

Two thousand years later, and on a different continent, the picture is rather different. I think it is fair to say that few would exclaim of Jesus today, "Look, the world is going after him!"

And yet for many of us the message is enduring and the desire to follow as strong as ever. You will remember that at the end of John's gospel, it is Thomas who refuses to believe in the resurrection until he has seen the wounds in Jesus's hands and side. Thomas gets his wish, yet Jesus says: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus recognised that this was no easy call.

I'm sure for many of us there are moments when we wish we could have been around to know Jesus in person, to ask the questions to which we long to hear answers. Yet when I read passages like this morning's I am also aware that I may have been none the wiser. When Andrew and Philip tell him that he has visitors, his response is that, "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." It can suit us sometimes to see the disciples are rather dull in the failures to understand, but I rather suspect that the answers would have been no more obvious to me. A former bishop who was the vicar of a parish in which I worshipped for a while was once heard to say "If I'd met Jesus, I don't think I would have liked him very much". And when I think about some of his more impenetrable teaching, I can see what that bishop meant.

So in view of these challenges, what does seeing and believing look like for us? And more importantly, what can help us on our journey?

The first thing is that we need to understand ourselves well. When Jesus tells Andrew and Philip that his hour has come, he is speaking about his vocation. The path Jesus followed was the one he was called to follow. And that is actually the same for each one of us. Of course in doing that we don't necessarily have the same clarity as Jesus. You like me may have taken a slightly circuitous route

through life and may remain a little unclear about those aspects of your life that have been truly vocational and those that have been more like dead ends.

That said most of us have some idea of those times that we have felt most alive; those things that make us feel the most whole. Whether in our working lives, relationships, volunteering or something else entirely it is likely that where we are making use of the gifts we have been given, serving others and giving and receiving joy we are probably closest to following our vocation. Sometimes we can see those times better in retrospect and sometimes we know it for sure at the time, but each of us has a calling in life that involves being the person we were created to be.

The second thing that I believe helps each of us on our journey is other people. In one sense that might sound contradictory – and indeed it can be challenging. If, as I have just suggested, each of us has a unique vocation, can't other people's views be confusing to us? Might we end up being unduly influenced by someone else's idea of God's call on our lives?

And of course that is why both self-knowledge *and* other people are important. One of the advantages of someone else's perspective is that they are not necessarily as caught up in our day to day anxieties as we are. Sometimes it is other people who can see in us what we fail to see – the areas where we excel; the gifts that we take for granted. You may have had times when you have seen in someone else what they were unable to see for themselves – perhaps something that was so obvious to you that you nearly didn't bother to mention it, but that came as a real surprise to them to hear.

I was reminded of this the other day talking to a friend who I studied with at theological college. When we left he had a vision of being part of a successful urban church, something big and thriving, full of energy and obvious possibilities. And he has just found himself being appointed to a rural parish - well, 6 parishes, actually – a job for which his new diocese considers him entirely suited, but which he would never before have considered. So he is embarking on a new challenge using skills others can see in him, but which he would never have imagined himself.

Being challenged by other people sometimes is important – and that is most especially in the case of each of our understandings of God. That is where we really do need one another. And this brings us back to the question of seeing and believing. In the conventional sense, none of us can see God. And yet each of us has an insight, an understanding, something that we cling onto, that we feel, sometimes more strongly and sometimes less. Each of us has a relationship with God, however tentative it may feel. And none of us has the complete picture.

It can be challenging to engage in conversations about God – even for those of us who have been going to church for many years, conversations about God are often those we are most willing to avoid. But sometimes they can be very important – especially among people we trust. Because gently, gently we can seek to find out just a little bit about the ways each one of us understands God and thereby have our own understandings expanded.

None of us will have the full picture of God, but among us there is a clearer picture than each one of us holds individually. That's one of the great gifts of a church. For each one of us to see Jesus better, it's always worth sharing some of our ideas and daring to be surprised.

Amen