

EPIPHANY 2

14 JANUARY 2024

1 Samuel 3. 1-10, 19-20

Psalm 139

John 1. 35-51

We find ourselves at the beginning of the Gospel of John today. As the gospel unfolds, we move from the beauty of the words of the prologue – *in the beginning was the word* – into the action of the gospel. We find ourselves out on the edge of Jewish territory with John the Baptist by the Jordan river. And rather than John being a lone voice, crying in the wilderness, as he is in Mark and Matthew and Luke, he appears to be the leader of a community, with disciples of his own. In fact there is a group still active today and known as Sabians, who originate from Iraq and Iran and who are followers of John the Baptist. In recent years they have been severely persecuted and displaced since the invasion of Iraq 20 years ago. So John the baptiser had disciples and we hear of some of them transferring their discipleship from him to Jesus.

You will most likely know that the gospel of John seems to operate at two levels; a mundane, everyday, kind of level; and a deeper spiritual, even mystical level. You will recall from chapter 3 of the gospel when Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night that famous verse *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.* Nicodemus said to him, *‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’* But the expression of being born again, which confuses Nicodemus, also means to be born from above. *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

So we hear Jesus ask: What are you looking for, they respond, ‘Rabbi’ ‘where are you staying?’

At one level these questions seem completely banal. What do you want? Where are you staying, John’s disciples ask? Strange question and response from the Word who was in the beginning with God. But beneath the surface we begin to be introduced to themes of John’s rich tapestry of images that point to this one so full of grace in whom there is the light of life. Jesus goes to the heart of the spiritual quest: *what are you seeking*, is what Jesus really is asking? And they want to know where he is abiding. Or, in what do you abide? And so in the word abide, we hear an echo of John chapter 15 as Jesus speaks of himself as the true vine: *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

And speaking of the holy spirit which will come to the disciples: *This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be among you.*

We are so familiar with a pattern of being called to discipleship which comes to us from Mark, Matthew and Luke. Next week we will hear Jesus calling the fishermen from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The fishermen respond immediately and go with Jesus. I can recall from childhood a

kind of worthiness to responding in this way – be ready to respond as these disciples did, was the implication.

But here in John there is a different dynamic. Here are people already involved in the spiritual quest; they are devoted, disciplined, searching; and they are curious. Where are you abiding? Come and see. And so we hear an echo of the affirmation from the prologue:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. Come and see!

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. Come and see!

So, John the Baptist's disciples become Jesus' disciples and they enter into a practice where they come to know this one who so fully bears the life of God. Something about Jesus is compelling and these seekers are drawn to him, and they follow; not because he calls them but because their curiosity, their own quest draws them.

For most of us who are in still in the church, as children or young people we were exposed to some kind of faith practice in others, maybe one person in particular; we learnt to imitate them, we learnt by watching, by participating with them, by their faith practice rubbing off on us. The call to come and see involves an invitation and a response. This usually happened in the family, or church or social circle we found ourselves in. It simply rubbed off, or we were in the right place at the moment when there was an epiphany for us and we began to follow in the way. And have continued, being drawn forward by the life of God.

One of the difficulties I find with the evangelical mindset is what I might call an over-the-line notion of salvation. That becoming Christian is about getting people over the line; or getting them to join the church – get into the barque of salvation; commit. But this is not the way it works. We know this if we have been at this spiritual quest for any length of time. It's not about getting over the line, but being on the path.

You have set yourselves the discipline of offering gracious hospitality. I like this affirmation because it is about offering something. But, with any kind of mission statement we do need to be wary of our claims simply being self-congratulatory – a kind of clanging gong, rather than a spirit we are trying to foster and offer. There is something about Jesus' invitation "come and see" which is truly hospitable, open, welcoming and ready to be responsive to the quest that John's disciples find themselves on.

For most of us our experience of growing up in the church was that Christians were born into families which were part of a church, into a society which, at least on the surface, affirmed that it was Christian. Those certainties are gone.

As we consider the future of the church we need to rethink our ways of being church. There is a shorthand about what it means to belong, to feel we are part of the church, just as we are, which I find is helpful. The church we have known had an order of belonging which went like this:

believe, behave, belong. This is the evangelical sequence: believe, behave, belong. Firstly you must believe the right things; then you must behave and only then can you truly belong.

But this sequence of belonging is ultimately constrictive meaning that we must measure up in the believing and behaving stakes before we can sense that we belong. This doesn't mean that we believe anything or that anything goes but it doesn't mean that welcome and hospitality are provisional.

Instead, we might consider what it means to offer hospitality which enables belonging first, and, in that belonging, can we begin to believe and then shape our lives according to the call of God – and so behave. Not behave like good little children, who shouldn't step out of line but order our lives in ways which reflect the good news. And so reflect the nature of the God we believe loves without condition.

We were all schooled in one way or another by the adage: whatever you do dear, don't talk about sex religion or politics. So, it runs against the grain to be able to say: come and see. Because we might have to talk about religion, about our faith – instead of the football, the latest holiday, the golf, the family. Part of the difficulty for us is that we are in an anxious space about the future of the church. We are anxious for people to belong because we are eager to preserve the church we have known. So, behind our desire for people to belong, there is an anxiety which can colour our hospitality.

I wonder, might we develop shared spiritual practices and disciplines into which we can invite people to share the journey. To enable people to belong without the sense that the church is a constrictive, moralistic space but one which reflects the grace and abundance and welcome of God. Ultimately, we are called to the pattern of the one who abandoned everything to the love of God. The course of our lives is that we move from birth to death; we come into the world with nothing; we leave with nothing. As Richard Rohr says: Jesus calling to us is to die, before we die, in order that we might receive the life of God. It is the gateway to the life of God. If we have passed this way we will truly be able to say: come and see.

May we find ways of being able to do this, personally and collectively; that the mysterious, life-giving way of God may be seen in our midst.

Andrew Boyle