

What Are You Looking For?

When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, it was a time of great excitement in Judea. He was preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and huge crowds came to the Jordan river to hear him, and to be baptised by him – as Mark's gospel tells us "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River." (Mark 1:5)

It made sense to many of the people that John might have been the one that they'd been waiting for – the Messiah, the Christ, who would restore the nation to what it had been in the time of King David.

This was of concern to the Jewish leaders who had been secure in their position for many generations – and they sent priests and Levites to challenge John as to who he was, and John was quick to answer, confessing freely, "I am not the Messiah." (John 1:20)

Then they asked him if he was Elijah or the Prophet. No. Then, they demanded, who was he?

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (John 1:23 from Isaiah 40:3)

So then they asked him why he was baptizing people, and he responded, "I baptise with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." (John 1:26-27)

John's gospel doesn't record how the priests and Levites reacted to that. While they were probably relieved that John wasn't the Messiah, they would have had to deliver to the Jewish leaders the news that the Messiah wasn't far away.

And sure enough, as we heard in the gospel reading today, the very next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him. This was John's mission 'to prepare the way of the Lord' being fulfilled. John recognised him – not just as Jesus, who was John's cousin – but recognised Jesus for who he was: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29)

To remove any doubt of what he meant, he told those gathered around him, "This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

This was what John was waiting for. This is what John's ministry was about. This was who John was waiting for. [...] John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.... ³⁴I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One" (1:32,34).

Two of John's disciples who heard this decided, on the spot, to follow Jesus.

When Jesus saw them following, he turned to them and asked: "What do you want?" or, in other translations, "What are you looking for?" Which might seem a bit odd... a more expected response might be "hello" or "who are you?" But no, Jesus asked "What do you want?"

What do you think they wanted? I guess, at a simple level, they wanted to physically follow Jesus – to see what he would do next. John had identified him as the Chosen One, after all, so it would be sure to be interesting.

I think Jesus was asking a deeper question of these two, and it's a deeper question for us as well: "What are you looking for?" or "What do you want?" What are we looking for when we choose to follow Jesus? What do we want when - or if - we choose to open our hearts to Jesus?

There, by the shore of the Jordan River, Jesus asked those two men what they really wanted. They were leaving John and following Jesus instead. Jesus challenged them as to why they were doing that.

What are we looking for today? What do we want for ourselves and our world today? Do we stop and ask ourselves such questions? We work our way through all the things of life – or struggle through all the things of life – day to day, week to week, year to year. Getting by, often fearing what’s to come, worrying about what will happen next. Trying to secure a place for ourselves and our loved ones in the world.

Is that what we want? At some level I think that is what we all want – but do you think that’s what those disciples wanted when they chose to follow Jesus on that day all those years ago? Was it that the life of a disciple of Jesus would simply be better than the life of a disciple of John?

Jesus asked them, “What do you want?”

When he asked them that, he wanted to make sure that they were following him for the right reasons. What did they want? Perhaps they were they looking for a military commander who would lead them out of the oppression they were experiencing from Rome? Perhaps they were looking for someone who would give them a better understanding of the Law so they would earn God’s favour?

Did what they want match what Jesus came to give?

When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching, he said: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Is that what the disciples were looking for, do you think? Had they ever thought about such a thing?

Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Is that what we’re looking for today? For that matter, do we really understand what that means?

What are we wanting from Jesus? What are we really hoping to get out of life? When it comes down to it, what are we looking for? And can we find it in Jesus?

If we are looking for anything other than the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then, in Jesus, we will be disappointed. If we are looking to Jesus to make us successful or wealthy or healthy or popular or whatever, then we will be disappointed – we might be wealthy or successful or healthy or popular, but then again we might not be... but those things are not promised by Jesus, and we shouldn’t be expecting them.

But if we are looking for the Lamb of God who takes away our sins (even if we don’t exactly understand what that might mean), then we will find that in Jesus.

It’s sometimes hard to put what we want into words though... and it was the same for those two disciples: They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?” (1:37b)

While, superficially, they’re making an enquiry about Jesus’ overnight accommodation, they’re also asking something deeper. In response to Jesus asking, “What do you want?”, they’re asking “Where will we find you?” or perhaps more simply answering, “You, Jesus.”

Jesus gives the perfect response, “Come...and you will see” (1:39a)

This conversation, like many others in John's gospel – and I'm thinking particularly of Jesus' 'born again' conversation with Nicodemus in chapter 3, and his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4 – is more profound than a casual reading might suggest.

"Come and you will see," says Jesus. Come and see where he is staying. And where he is going. And what he is saying. And what he is doing. Come and see what happens next. Come and see how the scriptures will be fulfilled, and how his mission will be accomplished. That's an invitation to those two disciples, and to us today. Come and you will see. Not that we will see it all, or understand it all. And we will still have questions. Following Jesus doesn't take away the mysteries of life and the world, but it lets us see things differently. It lets us look beyond the day-to-day and to glimpse everlasting life.

Come and see. Come and follow Jesus. Come and see his grace and mercy and love that is with us today, and always.

Think of what those first disciples would have seen as they followed Jesus. Crowds and teaching as they would have seen while they were with John, but also healing and miracles. Jesus talking to pharisees and lepers and adulterers and Romans and Samaritans and tax collectors. The plot against Jesus, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion and his death, but also his resurrection and Jesus showing them his hands and his side, inviting them to come and see once more – and believe.

Those two, and many more, saw a lot. So can we, though not in the physical sense: remember Jesus' words to the disciple Thomas, who would not believe that Jesus was raised until he saw for himself: *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

That's us, of course. We haven't seen, at least not in the same way that Thomas and those early disciples did, and yet we have come to believe. Because now we see everything differently. C.S. Lewis wrote, *"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."*

The two disciples accepted Jesus' offer to 'come and see', they saw where he was staying and spent the day with him. What they saw and did that day is not recorded, but we know it was convincing, because as a result one of them – Andrew – went to find his brother Simon, and tell him about Jesus. Andrew was convinced about Jesus, because he declared "We have found the Messiah," and then Andrew extended Jesus invitation 'Come and see' to his brother.

Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, and Jesus made a bold statement to Simon, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter). Peter who would become the leader of his disciples and of the early church. It wouldn't be a smooth ride for Peter, of course, but he would be a devoted follower of Jesus. Jesus renames him Cephas, the Aramaic word for rock. (The Greek word for rock is petros, or Peter.)

Jesus gave Simon him a new name, a new identity. Many of us have been called by nicknames in our lives – some by our parents, some by peers, some by colleagues. Some of them we like, some we don't. But this name that Jesus gives Simon is not just a nickname or just a term of affection. It is a new name. A new identity. Everything will now be different in Simon's life now that he is following Jesus. Even his name. He will now be Peter, the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

Names are important. In some Christian traditions new names are given at various names, confirmation names, new names on joining a religious order, and, as we saw last year, papal names. But all of us, even if we don't take on a new name, become changed when we choose to follow Jesus. When we come and see and join the body of Christ – the church. We have a new identity as followers of Jesus, as Christians. We can know what we are looking for, and set out to find it – to come and see the world with new eyes.

It might seem odd that it was Peter, rather than one of the first two who followed Jesus (one of whom is not even named in the gospel!), that apparently got the special attention and name, from Jesus, but I think that speaks to us all being different people, with different roles to play, as part of the church. We might think that Peter is the most important of the disciples in today's reading – but Peter is only there because Andrew told him about Jesus.

It is our task, as followers of Jesus, to extend his invitation to 'come and see'. We might not be able to articulate the gospel eloquently ... but that doesn't stop us being to share a simple invitation.

Today, what are you looking for? In church? In life? Even if we can't properly explain what it is that we are looking for, Jesus invitation is there for each of us, and all of us – come and see.

Amen