

Identifying Jesus

John 1.43-51

As I'm sure you all know, we are currently in Lectionary Year B, in which many of our Sunday Gospel readings are found in the St Mark's gospel. Every so often, however, the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary have decided to present us with a passage from St John's gospel. Because these readings from St John are spread throughout the year, it's helpful to spend a few moments looking at their preceding context, in order to make better sense of them.

The Gospel of John opens with the familiar Prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...

John 1.1-18

This is followed in chapter 1 by four events, beginning with St John the Baptist's witness to Jesus (1.19-28) beside the river Jordan. Then St John the Evangelist introduces three scenes in rapid succession, each opening with the phrase, "The next day..." (Perhaps there's an echo here of Genesis chapter 1, paralleling the successive days of revelation with the successive days of creation, but I'd not want to press this too hard.)

1. The first "next day" text presents the titles of Jesus uttered by John the Baptist (1.29-34)
2. The second "next day" text presents the invitation and promise of Jesus (1.35-42)
3. The third "next day" text presents the invitations of Jesus to Philip and Nathanael and the promise of the Son of Man (1.43-51), and this is today's gospel reading.

This sequence of texts is significant because, following the Prologue, John – both Johns, in fact: the Evangelist and the Baptist – continue to bear witness to Jesus' identity, which will be fully revealed as the gospel unfolds. As we come to this morning's reading, Jesus has already been revealed as "the Lamb of God" (1.29, 36), "the one who baptises with the Holy

Spirit" (1.33), "the Son of God" (1.34) and "Rabbi" (1.38), and we'll return to the seemingly simple title "Rabbi" a little later.

The first words Jesus speaks in St John's gospel comprise a question. John's gospel was written anything up to ninety years after the Crucifixion, so the question he records is one addressed not only to the first Christian disciples, but to the disciples of his own time, and to every subsequent reader or hearer since then, including us. The question is phrased very simply: "What are you looking for?" (1.38). It's a question that will be answered throughout the gospel, as Jesus himself revealed as 'what we are looking for'.

The question is followed, not by an answer, but by an invitation and a promise: "Come and see!" (1.39). The promise is more evident in John's original Greek, which might be better translated, "Come and you will see!" And, just as the question is addressed to all Jesus' disciples down through the ages, so also these words of invitation and promise are spoken not only to his first followers, but to everyone who hears his words. There is also an implicit word of guidance here for Christian mission and ministry – don't just tell people about the love of God in Jesus Christ; invite them to come with you, but you'd better make sure you have something worth showing them! The invitation and promise are no less the context for the revelation of Jesus' identity now, in the twenty-first century, than they were then, in the first.

This morning's reading is set in Galilee, where Jesus calls Philip, with the familiar discipleship invitation, "Follow me" (1.43). John makes a link here between Philip and the disciples Andrew and Peter (1.44), noting that they were all from Bethsaida, probably the eponymous fishing town on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Philip then goes to find Nathanael and tells him who he believes Jesus to be:

"We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

John 1.45

Interestingly, Philip's words not only proclaim Jesus as the one who fulfils the expectation of the Jewish scriptures, but also identify him as the son of his earthly father, Joseph, from the Galilean town of Nazareth. This provokes Nathanael to the kind of response that southerners

stereotypically have to anyone or anything from “oop north” – “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” – but Philip dismisses Nathanael’s sceptical assessment of Nazareth by repeating Jesus’ own invitation and promise, “Come and you will see” (1.46).

When Jesus meets Nathanael, he immediately recognises him as “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (1.47). He sees in Nathanael a person without guile, someone who can be relied upon to speak the truth.

Nathanael is bewildered by Jesus’ knowledge of him, and asks, “Where did you come to know me?” Jesus responds, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you” (1.48). This has sometimes been interpreted as indicating Jesus’ divine omniscience, but the fig tree traditionally denotes a place associated where rabbis study the Torah. As we noted earlier, Jesus has already been identified by the title “Rabbi”, and perhaps he – or John – intended his reference to the fig tree to reflect his role as the supreme teacher of the Jewish Law.

At any rate, Nathanael immediately makes his own act of witness to Jesus’ identity in the words, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (1.49). It’s such rush of acclamations that it’s tempting to picture Nathanael as an enthusiastic puppy, the words tumbling out of his mouth in unrestrained excitement. Twice now, Jesus has been identified as “Rabbi” (cp. 1.36). Twice now, Jesus has been identified as “Son of God” (cp. 1.34). But Nathanael’s witness breaks new ground, too, as he identifies Jesus as “King of Israel”. There is a sombre foreshadowing here of Jesus’ passion and death, in which he is mocked as “King of the Jews” by Pontius Pilate, who subsequently writes “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” as the charge against Jesus which is placed on his cross (John 19.19-22).

Jesus himself doesn’t treat his own remark about seeing Nathanael under the fig tree as anything very wonderful:

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

John 1.50

This promise is only spoken to Nathanael, as denoted by the singular form of “you” in the Greek; modern English, of course, makes no distinction between the singular and plural forms of “you” (except in certain Yorkshire communities).

The final verse in our gospel reading completes this whole section, in which John presents the invitation and promise that Jesus offers. Now Jesus' words are spoken in a form that embraces both the first disciples and all subsequent disciples, ourselves included:

“Very truly, I tell you [*plural*], you [*plural*] will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

John 1.51

Immediately, we are transported back to the story of Jacob's Ladder in the book of Genesis. Jacob lies down to sleep, places a rock under his head for a pillow, and then has a vivid dream of a staircase connecting earth and heaven, upon which angels are continually ascending and descending. On awakening, he sets up the rock as a pillar to mark the place, which he names Bethel (בֵּיתֵאֱלֹהִים, *beth-el*), meaning “the house of God” (Genesis 28.10-17). It's a wonderful image of the dynamic relationship between God and humanity, because it illustrates how God's communication with us is not a sporadic, occasional phenomenon, but a continuous and unending exchange, symbolised by the constant motion of God's angels (ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*) or “messengers”.

For Christians, however, it is not a ladder but Jesus himself who now joins heaven to earth. Jesus himself is the house in which God lives. Moreover, Jesus is the “Son of Man”, who will be lifted up (cf. John 3.14, 8.23, 12.32-34) on the cross, so that the cross becomes a new pillar, marking the place where the relationship between heaven and earth is most clearly seen, and upon which Christ completes the work of the Father, as he declares, “It is finished” (19.30).

This opening chapter of John's gospel guides us on the start of our journey, as we follow Jesus to the ultimate fulfilment of his invitation and promise: “Come and you will see”.

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