

“Come & See”

The season after the Epiphany is a time of revelation in the church. We hear stories about Jesus being revealed as the Messiah at various times in the gospels. Last week it was the revelation to the Magi as representatives of the Gentiles. This week we hear how John the Baptizer reveals to his followers who Jesus is.

John is a fiery preacher and a no-holds-barred condemner of sin no matter your station in the world. He is just as comfortable condemning the sins of rich and the people, tax collectors, prostitutes, as he is the soldiers of the Romans, the Sadducees and Pharisees, or anyone else. John having spent much time in the wilderness fasting, meditating, and praying has learned what God wants him to do. He has learned what is coming and he wants to prepare the world for it.

Then he is in Jerusalem with his disciples, and he sees Jesus in the distance. For the first time he can point to him as the one, the actual Messiah. He calls him the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Words we will say later as part of the Eucharistic Prayer.) It must have been a mystifying experience for John’s followers. They had latched on to him and his teaching. His powerful message about the coming kingdom is now pointing not to another fiery man or zealot or military leader, but to one he calls the Lamb of God. The lamb is the image of the one who is sacrificed for the sins of others. They were looking for a Messiah who was more like a roaring lion than a gentle lamb. They were expecting a King, general, and conqueror like David. One who could inspire the people of Israel to rise and throw out the Romans just as the Maccabees threw out the Greeks.

Then something interesting happens. John testifies that he has seen the Holy Spirit come down on Jesus. Those of us who know the three synoptic gospels remember that this happened after John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. But John the evangelist skips the baptism part. He mentions that John baptizes but he does not mention Jesus’ baptism. Jesus’ baptism by John was a sticky point for all the gospel writers. John’s baptism was for the washing away of sins. The sinless Lamb of God would not need this baptism. In each of the synoptic Gospels John the Baptizer argues with Jesus and tries to refuse baptizing him. Jesus always insists saying it is the right thing to do. Over the millennia theologians have argued that it is the act that commences Jesus’ public ministry. The words from on high, “This is my beloved with whom I am well pleased” and the descending dove are signs of that commencement. But the gospels were still uncomfortable with the baptism. John is so uncomfortable that he writes it out of the story completely. He refers to John being a baptizer and then jumps ahead to John seeing the dove settle on Jesus.

So having dispensed with that theological problem, John the Evangelist goes on to have John the Baptizer point out Jesus to his disciples for a second time. This time two of his disciples get curious, and they begin to follow Jesus. Feeling his neck tingling and stops to confront his followers. He asks them “What are you looking for.” The two disciples of John pull a Jesus on him and answer his question with one of their own. They say, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” While answering a question with a question is clever, this question is odd. They have been told by John that this man is the Messiah and the best they can come up with is to ask him where he is staying as if they were looking for a hotel recommendation. They could have asked for words of wisdom, a blessing, or even said “Our teacher John told us you are the Lamb of God and the Son of God? Is that so? Can you prove such a stupendous claim.”

Jesus must have realized their confusion because he does not chide them for such a foolish question. Instead, he invites them to follow him and see. It is one of the simplest and most powerful invitations in the Bible. When I spoke last week about sharing our story of faith and our epiphany this is the type of invitation I had in mind. When you tell a friend about how God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church have changed you and they ask, "How can that be?" Your response could be a simple "Come and see." Do not underestimate the power of Jesus' words, even his most plain and simple statements. These two curious, eager, and awkward disciples of John the Baptizer accepted the invitation. As John the Evangelist tells it, "They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day." I guess that they did not remain because Jesus' lodgings were so cool, or he served a great cup of tea. They stayed because they were transfixed by what Jesus taught.

They were so much in awe of what they heard that one of them ran to get his brother. His name was Andrew, and he goes to recruit his brother Simon telling him, "We have found the Messiah." As soon as Jesus meets Simon, he renames him Cephas which in Greek is Peter or the rock. How different this story is from the synoptic gospels. Andrew and Peter are not fishing with their father. There is no call, after which they instantly follow.

Because this version of the calling of the disciples is different from Matthew, Mark and Luke does not make it wrong nor does it make John right. Each write is telling the Jesus story from a different point of view. That said, what I ask in cases like these is what is John trying to communicate to us that might be different from the others? I think John wants us to see charisma of Jesus and the power of his teaching. He wants us to see that John the Baptizer is selfless in his ministry. He is pointing to one to come after him because he was before him. He wants us to see that with the commencement of Jesus' ministry John's ministry will recede. John no longer needs to prepare people for what is to come, because the Messiah is here and can speak for himself. John the Evangelist wants us to see how quickly the disciples of John the Baptizer move to following Jesus.

John was a powerful prophet, preacher, and teacher but none of this went to his head. He knew his place in the order of things. He knew, unlike some contemporary ministers that it was not about him, his ego, his abilities, or his power. He knows that all of that was God-given and was to be used to point the way. Just as Jesus asks us to point the way to the cross through our actions, words, passion, and through the sacrament. A meal we offer weekly to all who hunger and thirst for spiritual nourishment at the table of God. The table with food that reveals Jesus to all who partake of it. As I often say:

"This is the table, not of the church, but of the Lord.  
It is made ready for those who love him  
And for those who want to love him more.  
So come, you who have much faith and you who have little,  
You who have been here often and you who have not been here long,  
You who have tried to follow and you who have failed.  
Come, because it is the Lord who invites you.  
It is his will that those who want him should meet him here."