

Sunday 18 January – Second Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

It is both interesting and instructive to consider the first words given to Jesus by the writers of each of the four Gospels. We know from that great prologue to John's Gospel that words matter and that Jesus is the very incarnation of the Word of God, so this should prepare us to pay especial attention to Jesus' words when we first get to hear them - in particular His first public words. In the first Gospel, Matthew (note: not the first to be written - probably Mark - but placed first because early Christian scholars believed it to be the first written) - Matthew gives us the dialogue between Jesus and His cousin John (the Baptist) which were in our reading for last week. When John suggests to Jesus that it should be Jesus baptising him rather than the other way around, Jesus replies:

"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness."
Matthew 3:15

Characteristic of Matthew it is all about fulfilment. In Mark, that most immediate and action-filled account of Jesus' life, His first words are to the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee:

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Mark 1:17

And in Luke (ignoring the words in the temple as a child and those used to address the tempter in the wilderness) Jesus' first public words are in the synagogue in Nazareth when, having read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah about God's anointing the prophet to declare "good news" and "proclaim the year of the Lord's favour", Jesus tells them:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:21

But, in John, Jesus first words are to the disciples of John (the Baptist), one of whom is subsequently identified as Andrew - the brother of Simon-Peter. John has told them that Jesus is "the son of God" on whom he saw the spirit descend, and "the lamb of God", so they choose to follow Jesus who then asks them:

"What are you seeking?" John 1:38

Which really is a question that we might all want to address. What are we seeking? What motivates us? What is that we really need, not just on the surface, but deep down into the core of our being? What are we looking for? How, I wonder might we respond to Jesus' question. We live in a society in which that acquisition of "things" has a very central place. Of course, sometimes those "things" have a very solid physical form, perhaps homes and property; but sometimes they are more nebulous, experiences of all sorts - perhaps travel - or even people - friends, companions. The answer the two disciples gives might seem slightly strange, they answer His question with one of their own:

"Rabbi, where are you staying?" John 1:38

Our modern English translation doesn't really help with understanding their question. They're not just asking Jesus where He's pitched His tent, or which house is He lodging in. We get a better idea if we use a slightly more old-fashioned word: "where are you abiding?" might be better. There is much more a sense of solidity and permanence, you might almost say that they're asking Jesus "what are your roots?" or "on what do you base your life and being?". Jesus' answer comes very close to His first words in Mark (remember: "Follow me..."), when He says to them:

"Come and see." John 1:39

They do then follow Jesus to where He was staying and John tells us "remained with him that day". The word for remained being exactly the same as their earlier question, so again perhaps better translated as "abided with him that day". Jesus' answer captures a primary message of John's Gospel: If you want to know the word made flesh, come and see Jesus. If you want to know what love is like, come and see Jesus. If you want to experience God's glory, to be filled with bread that never perishes, to quench your thirst with living water, to be born again, to abide in love, to behold the light of the world, to experience the way, the truth, and the life, to enter into life everlasting, if you want to know God, come and see Jesus.

What follows on for these first two disciples is also a pattern that will be repeated throughout John's Gospel - and beyond. Andrew goes to his brother Peter and tells him "we have found the Messiah" and takes Peter to Him. It is interesting to note that in the other Gospels it is Peter that proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, yet here in John we have Andrew

introducing Jesus to Peter as the Messiah. In the passage right after ours, Philip becomes a follower and immediately testifies to Nathaniel, using the same words as Jesus did: "Come and See" (1:46). Then, in chapter 4, the Samaritan woman does the same thing, she encounters Jesus at the well then she goes out to testify and to tell her fellow Samaritans to "Come and See." They do come and they also encounter Jesus and they have a direct revelation of their own which leads them to testify:

"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." John 4: 42

Those first words of Jesus in John's Gospel are, then, among the most important words, His invitation to the first disciples to "come and see" are exactly the words we should be using to invite others. If anyone ever asks you why you go to Church, the succinct answer is just "come and see". For almost all of us at some point in our lives have received that message to "come and see", see the "word made flesh" and then to remain/abide in His presence. Jesus promises that He will abide in those who abide in him (John 15:4) so that His joy may be in us and that our joy may be complete.

Amen