

A SERMON IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Behold the Lamb of God

As you may know, this is my first time standing up to preach in this chapel, as I begin my time here as Interim Chaplain. Having had a bit of a fuss made last week in the parish I have come from to bid me farewell there, and then gathering some attention as I arrive here as someone new, today's second lesson from St John's Gospel is something of a fitting one to hear.

Here we have John the Baptist, a man whom even Jesus himself describes as the greatest born of woman, having to avoid being the centre of attention. John has been going about preaching the need to repent, to return to living in God's way, and baptizing those who respond to this message in the river, as a sign of what they are committing themselves to: a symbolic washing to mark a fresh start.

John knew all the old prophecies, like the one we heard in our first lesson. The crowd who came to him knew them too. The God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, had long promised to God's chosen people a Messiah, one who would come and set them free.

They also knew that the prophecies, like we have heard, spoke of this coming Messiah as the one who would bring the people back to living in God's way. But generally, they got less excited about having to live differently in case it might be too difficult! They much preferred the idea of being set free, especially when they were an occupied or displaced people, and saw their liberation in terms of overthrowing their oppressors.

Now, as much as that might be necessary for liberation, to be truly free they needed also to return to living in God's way. John knew this, John remembered this, and John encouraged the people to live like this. But John was not the Messiah, and John knew that too.

John knows his role is to watch for the coming Messiah, and to prepare his way. And recognise him he does 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.'

To our ears that phrase is perhaps a little odd. We aren't the only ones! When the first missionaries of the church went to New Guinea, they encountered a people who had never seen sheep, who didn't even know what a lamb was. And as these missionaries got to know these people they translated this verse for them as 'Behold the pig of God...' In their culture, pigs filled a very similar role to that filled by sheep in first century Palestine – they were raised both for food, and for sacrificial offerings.

I'm not sure that there is an immediate and obvious thing for us to point to in our own culture that fills the role. But the need for this careful translation highlights something of what John is trying to say. In Jesus, John sees the extra-ordinary taking into itself the ordinary, the divine taking to itself humanity.

John recognises who Jesus is. John sees Jesus as the Messiah. But unlike those who will lament Jesus not overthrowing the Roman oppressors, John sees in Jesus the fulfilment of the whole of the age-old prophecies. John sees in Jesus the one who can bring the people back to God. And in that, John perceives in Jesus the one who will set the people free.

And so, John gets out of the way. John sends his own followers after Jesus. John puts the focus on Jesus, rather than on himself.

It is always tempting to focus too much on ourselves. We live in a world that encourages us to do so. As I mentioned as I began, having had a week or so of being acclaimed (both in my departing and as the new person arriving), I know the temptation to exalt myself, to place myself up high and lofty – and not just by standing up here in the pulpit...

And it isn't the one who comes with adulation and acclaim that we watch for. It is the one coming quietly. Throughout our second reading, we see no dramatic public signs. John sees something, but only because he knew to look. And the disciples of John who go to follow Jesus, they are not given some dramatic sign to set them on their way. Just a quiet invitation 'Come and see'. And what things did they see when they followed Jesus!

When Jesus teaches, he encourages those who hear to seek him amongst the oppressed, amongst those who seek freedom, amongst those who seek liberation. Jesus comes us today quietly and on the margins of society. And it is only if we know to look for him that we stand a chance of seeing.

Our first reading sees the promised Messiah coming to the people of Israel, to those who received the first promises of God. But the prophet also reminds us that the coming Messiah is for all nations, and all peoples. The Messiah is coming to be God's salvation 'unto the end of the earth'.

So what must we do?

Well, how much do we raise ourselves up? Do we make ourselves the centre of attention, when the focus should be on others? Do we think our contribution is critical, when it doesn't all depend on us? I know I can be guilty of all this. When I receive adulation, I know I can become prideful. When I have a prominent role, I know I can think myself the only one that matters.

But as John the Baptist says of Jesus just a little further on in the Gospel, 'I must decrease, he must increase'. We must turn our attention from ourselves on to him to whom all glory, honour and majesty belongs – Jesus Christ our Lord and God. And through him, onto those amongst he is most readily present to us: the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the forgotten. And there we find the Messiah, the one who sets us his people truly free.

Forgive me Lord if I should boast, save in the Cross of Christ my God. Amen.

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The Second Sunday After the Epiphany – January 19, 2020
Isaiah 49.1-7, John 1.29-42*