

Second Sunday after Epiphany: Baptism of Christ, John 1:29-42 St John and St Stephen's 15.01.23

“What do you seek?”

We live in an information saturated age and an anxious age. In the age of Google, questions and answers are reduced to questions requiring information and answers which give you the information you require.

What a search engine does, when you type in a question, is match your words as exactly as possible to places where you might best be able to find the answers. But it's not failsafe, and it's shallow. If, in a moment of existential angst, I type into Google, 'What is the meaning of my life?' I get, initially:

"My Life" is a song by American rapper 50 Cent and the second official single of his forthcoming fifth studio album Street King Immortal', and a link to his song...

After that, I might be luckier and find a second entry, encouraging me to 'Take the 'three-minute Chakra test'. Or the third entry: 'How to discover your life purpose in about 20 minutes'. A simple search for information cannot give me what I really seek.

Our gospel today has at its heart a question asked by Jesus, which is not answered; and a question asked him by some disciples, which he answers in a certain way. I'd like us to look at these questions and answers and what they reveal about how Jesus deals with us.

We're still in Epiphany and we're still thinking about how God is revealed in Jesus Christ. We've seen how the Magi discovered that God was revealed in the baby in Bethlehem. And today we see how God was revealed through the baptism of Jesus. But it's the account of *John*, who's always the odd one out...His is the one gospel where the baptism of Jesus is not narrated but alluded to.

So, instead of a riverside scene, that we might imagine in Matthew, with Jesus going down into the not so clean Jordan, here we have the event commented upon by the Baptizer himself. The passage opens with John looking up and seeing Jesus walking towards him. He is quick to comment: 'Behold, the Lamb of God,

who takes away the sin of the world! He has recognized Jesus for who he is and he wants to testify to his real nature, until people understand.

It's easy to forget that at this point John still had his own disciples, but that was about to change. We're told 'the next day John again was standing with two of his disciples'. Again, he watches Jesus walk by and again he testifies: 'Behold, the Lamb of God.' This time it's enough to make two of his followers turn away from John and go after Jesus instead. Jesus notices this, turns, and asks them a question. Here is that question at the heart of the passage.

Different translations inevitably render this differently, but the sense of the question is 'What are you looking for?', or better, 'What do you seek?'

As one commentator points out, a lot hangs on the way we phrase things: You 'look for' your glasses; you 'seek' the meaning of life. To *seek*, is a word associated with the Magi: they sought the King; they sought what the star meant; they were seekers. Seekers is also a term used in reports on mission in the UK about which groups the church is effective in reaching and which groups it isn't.

Spiritual seekers are at home with the spiritual quest for meaning, but they don't necessarily think the traditional church can offer anything to this search. Unlike Google questions and answers, 'What do you seek?' coming from the lips of Jesus, is a profound, *meaning of life* question, and one which many people never really ask themselves.

It's one of those bits of the gospel that is best slowed down, made into slow motion and pondered over. When we read the New Testament accounts of Jesus, we can race through, jump over bits, miss their significance. That's why the reading out loud of Scripture in public worship is important. Although it's good to have the written word, the word that is heard can reveal something new for us. I'd like to re-read that part of the gospel and see if, in your mind's eye, you can slow it down to that one question, and then, imagine Jesus asking it of you, today. Here we go: it might help if you close your eyes.

'The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What do you seek?''

It's easy to miss that this question coming from the lips of Jesus is the very first thing he is recorded as saying, in this gospel. In fact, for someone who is presented as the Word of God, Jesus has been pretty silent up till this moment.

'What do you seek?' is a fair question though, because so many, when presented with the life of Jesus, sought something other than what he was there for. They sought political freedom, they sought to control him and they sought to control who could be saved. 'What do you seek?' he says to these disciples of John, who now appear to be following him.

It's like today – people go to church for many different reasons – they like the music, they like the sense of history, the building; they are upset about a loss, or want to celebrate something happy, like a birth. Or maybe they feel a bit desperate. Through the recent upheavals people have perhaps become more likely to be spiritual seekers. To all these people, and to us, who think we know why we're here, Jesus still asks: 'What do you seek?' And He asks it repeatedly in life, in different stages.

I recall a period of life when spiritual things seemed a bit of a struggle. I had two small children, I went to a big, lively church, a midweek group for Mums; I had read the bible and I knew you were supposed to pray every day. Not being a morning person and having two small children meant I never found time to pray in the morning, so I decided I would try and sit down when they had gone to bed, at about 8pm each evening.

I would go into my room, sit down, relax, and try and read a portion of the bible and pray, but it was hard work, partly because I was usually tired but also because I wasn't very challenged in my Christian life. I'd been going to the same type of church for about fifteen years – I'd heard a lot of similar sermons and wasn't sure, apart from looking after small children, what my role in the body of Christ really was.

I remember looking up from the bible one evening, looking out of the window as the evening drew on, and thinking 'Is this it?' It was a 'meaning of life' question. I meant, 'is this what being a Christian is always going to be like?' Flat and same-y...? If I was asking this question of God, I now believe He was asking it of me first.

Theologians call that 'prevenient grace'.

He asked first, calling deeper, as He always does. 'What do you seek?' 'Is this all there is?' Looking back with the benefit of hindsight at what happened after that, in my life, and the life of our family, I can see that it was in many ways the end of a certain period of life and the beginning of something that would go in a very different direction. God knew this: I didn't. It was the end of a settled time spiritually and the start of the something challenging and new. I wonder what stage you're at in your life with Jesus? I wonder what stage we're at as a church?

The question at the bottom of my apparent dissatisfaction was that fundamental question 'What do you seek?' The disciples' answer to Jesus' question is not recorded in our passage – it would take them a lifetime to work out. But in any case, they, walking along behind Jesus and trying to work him out, now ask a question back: 'Rabbi, where are you staying?'

It could be a request for information (like 'where is the tomato purée?' - a question I always find myself asking when I open the fridge door) or it could be they were trying to build up a picture of this man, this enigmatic 'lamb', about whom John was so enthusiastic.

And Jesus does give an answer, but it's not an answer *for information*, it's an invitation *to come*. It's the same for us:

'Come and see'.

Come and spend time with me.

Come and let's talk.

Come and let's eat.

What do you seek?

