



“Come and see”

John's gospel is not like any of the others. It's more poetic, mystical, at times impenetrable. It has stories in it that none of the others have – and the central person around which the gospel revolves – Jesus of Nazareth – is also described differently. He's more otherworldly than for instance in Luke's gospel. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is active, travelling around, healing, teaching, grabbing mustard seeds from the ground, climbing into boats, going up mountains, attracting crowds wherever he goes. He's more accessible in a way – we can see him clambering about, we can see what he's up to – and quite often he explains what he means.

In John's gospel, by contrast, there are fewer earthy proclamations of justice or healing stories. Jesus is more contemplative, more critical of established religion, more likely to have a long conversation; he's often asked questions in prose and he answers them with poetry. He is imaginative, creative and curious; always finding new ways to say what is happening - saying he is like a vine or a shepherd or a gate or the way.

I think that reading John's gospel is like reading a musical score. And listening to John's gospel is like listening to a jazz band with multiple parts and instruments and voices. There is the melody – maybe played by the solo clarinet, a well known melody – we know the words or some of them, we do vaguely recognise the chorus – from today's gospel it might be the phrase Lamb of God. Oh yes- I've heard that before. I've never totally got it, but I've heard the words and the tune enough sometimes to join in. Around the clarinet are other instruments. The piano plays a riff that complements the clarinet – giving a slightly different perspective on the same song but will ultimately give way to the clarinet – Look – it seems to be saying – look and listen to that

solo over there. Suddenly the trumpet erupts with a glorious improvisation, shimmering notes that are powerful enough to turn water into wine. And there are the underlying jazz chords played by rhythm and bass; the 12 bar blues that keep the whole show on the road; repeating over and over the themes around which all the improvisation can fly; the fundamental themes of John's gospel – glory, mystery, transcendence, that find expression in the balletic improvised conversations that are recorded nowhere else – between Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus and Lazarus, Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

In listening to the stories of John, we are asked to listen to the layers of meaning underneath the melodies – the notes that you know are there but find it hard to pick out.

Today we heard a short extract from the beginning of the gospel. John the Baptist and Jesus are in the middle of a three day expedition. Today we got the second and third days of this little tableau; the baton is passing from John the Baptist to his cousin – and he is beginning to step aside. Soon John will be imprisoned by a frightened politician and then he will be executed by the same politician, who had not appreciated John's habit of telling truth to power and in a rash drunken moment, ordered him dead.

Stories of every day despotism, whimsical cruelty. But in this gospel today, we are still at the beginning – still recovering from the astonishing opening poem that John begins his gospel with – “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”. Still recovering from the inexhaustible mystery of that thunderous incarnation captured in the cry of a completely dependent child. Still recovering from the mysticism of Christmas, we plunge

into this multi layered story through the ordinary conversations between men on an ordinary day.

To receive the truths in John's gospel, we have to cultivate ears to hear the layer after layer of meaning; knowing that our lived experience is deepened when we learn to listen to the world like that. Listen to ourselves like that. Listen to each other like that.

An everyday exchange: How are you? I'm fine. Masks a longer story of, well, I'm not fine. I'm trapped. I'm sorry. I'm sad. I'm elated, I'm bored, I'm barely alive in here.

John's gospel asks us always to go deeper, beyond the obvious melodies, and listen attentively for the splashes of tears that accompany the words.

Just this last week, I have had some conversations and experiences that have stayed with me. After the example of John's gospel, I wondered what it would be like to hear them as gospel stories.

A man in his forties works in a hotel kitchen here in London from 8 o'clock in the morning to 8 o'clock at night. He has one day off a week which you might expect he looks forward to. In his past, he has been in the army, he has had a family and children, he has worked in some of the top restaurants working his way up from kitchen porter, a KP as he called it. At one time he worked in a vast underground restaurant by Old Street station – called Ping Pong: huge numbers of young people go there he says – they still do – to play table tennis and eat and drink – it's a night out. Now he's in a kitchen that is less stressful – and that suits him – although breakfast service is often very busy. But his days off are really hard because he's homeless. He finds days off exhausting as he simply has to keep walking. During the day after his day off, he is chopping vegetables and all he can think of is sleep. It obsesses him.

"So do you have a plan for 2017?" I asked. "No" he replies "I don't make plans, because you never know what might happen. In a

single day your life can change for ever". "What kind of thing do you mean?" I asked him, expecting him to say that he meant that disaster can strike at any moment. "Well", he said with a smile, "for instance, love".

Another man works in a shop not far from here. Technically the owner of the shop pays him the minimum wage, but because the man himself is homeless, the owner charges him rent to leave his suitcase in the room out the back – and so the wage is reduced. He is trapped in this situation. "I am homeless" he says – "but I am homeless de luxe". I'm not sure I believe him as I see him bed down in Jermyn Street.

Another man whose hands are frozen shakes my hand and looks me in the eye. Another speaks quietly so that people around can't hear – "I have no shoes" he says. "My feet are so wet; I need shoes that don't leak". We are located yards from thousands of new shoes in the sports shop at Piccadilly Circus. His feet are indeed soaking and so we buy new shoes.

On the bus, I see a large man get on and other passengers wrinkle their noses and move away. It is a cold day but I watch him come and stand in the middle of the bus, and aching on this freezing day, he opens the window next to where he is standing. Is that because he knows he smells bad I wonder? And to comfort myself, I conclude that he just wants some fresh air. But then another passenger gets off and he goes to sit down, before he does, carefully opening the window next to him before he does so.

I have witnessed this week more than other weeks, the close relationship between the dignity and shame of men – and they have all been men. "I can do carpentry" another said to me yesterday. "I am good at cleaning". And then with a twinkle, "I haven't always been like this, I used to be a millionaire".

And into these stories and these ordinary conversations between men on an average winter day, Jesus speaks for the first time in John's gospel in today's reading. And what are his first words? Not "Look at me" or even

“follow me” or “this is my plan to fix your life”, or “don’t you know who I am”?

His first words are “What are you looking for?”

And his next words are “Come and see”.

It’s a deliciously unexamined, undescribed open ended “and they stayed with him the rest of the day”. He could have told any number of parables we’ve never heard of and that remain unrecorded; that little known story the Prodigal Aunt – or the parable of the woman chief executive or the black president or the bouncing bishop. Who knows what stories he told, what jokes he regaled them with, the miracles he pointed them to.

“Come and see”, is the invitation. And not some other worldly escape into a fantasy: but come and see your life as I see it. This invitation to come and see, to look for the multiple layers of life is there for us – yes to try to see the world and other people as God sees them – but it is also and perhaps more importantly in the first instance, for us.

It’s as if the invitation to come and see from Christ goes something like this – Come and see yourself as I see you.... because I know when you say fine, you sometimes mean that you’re lonely. Because I know that when you are casually cruel, you go home and look at yourself in the bathroom mirror and berate yourself for being spiteful. Because I know that you know life is limited, time is short, but some days you don’t know what to do for the best.

One of the gifts of faith and one of the hardest to receive is that we Christians believe, not so much that we see the truth or have it in our possession somehow, not so much that we see, but that we are seen.

And so the meaning of epiphany, the uncovering, the revealing that we celebrate at this time of year, is itself revealed in its reversal. It is not only Jesus who is revealed. When we accept the invitation “Come and see”, we ourselves are seen; we are uncovered and we learn compassion for the layer after layer of experience, of meaning in

our lives, not just because we think that’s a nice thing to do, but because that’s how God is.

The novelist Sara Maitland links this kind of uncovering of ourselves with our spiritual lives in this way.

We all have, she says, different tolerance of our own nakedness. Some of us would be comfortable naked in a crowd – on a beach – maybe even in church... Others of us are not even really comfortable being naked by ourselves in our own bedroom with the curtains closed and the lights off. We are all somewhere along that spectrum of being comfortable with our own nakedness from naturists to fully clothed with socks in bed.

When we encounter one another, we see, sometimes what we want to see, we interpret one another usually for our own benefit, in conversations we are rarely really listening to what the other person has to say – we are usually working out what we’re going to say next, especially in stressful social situations, not least having coffee after church. When we encounter one another, we present ourselves, knowing that however much we love another person, or respect them, we probably will resist being really seen by them.

This is where the mystery of God in the Christian epiphany is extraordinary. When we answer the invitation Come and See – we are also relenting our defences – because we will ourselves be seen. All of it. All our glories and desires, hopes and regrets, all our muddled past, our huge mistakes, our wrong turns; the losses we live with, the unfulfilled desires, the hopelessness that threatens to overwhelm. And the beauty of us; our tender, hopeful hearts, our yearnings and if onlys, and I don’t think I cans, and our maybe I shoulds.

The gaze of the Creator rests on us – on you and me – you are contemplated in all your beauty and muddle and periodic fury – you are seen.

That’s why John’s gospel with its layers of mysterious meaning is so important because

in learning to read John's gospel we learn better to read life.

The prayer that St Ignatius taught his community of Jesuits to pray every day – the Examen - isn't so much a report of all the things I've done or said and how many I'm sorry for. It's the other way round. God - show me my day. Show me how you saw my day. Help me not so much to see as be seen; and to know that I am loved and forgiven and free.

Yesterday in this church we witnessed two people who pledged themselves to one another, to be seen by God and by one another for the rest of their lives. Lia from our own congregation married Jonathan who is a Methodist minister; and so we had a wonderful ecumenical service together Anglicans and Methodists singing the hymns of Charles Wesley together.

At the beginning of each year, John Wesley encouraged the members of his Method movement to pray what he called the Covenant Prayer which for me, expresses this gospel invitation. Come and see, in order to

be seen, and further to deepen our own trust in God, love of self and neighbour.

Let us pray in the words of the Covenant Prayer.

'I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it
be ratified in heaven.'

Amen.

Lucy Winkett