



Second Sunday of Epiphany  
Sunday 15 January 2012

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## Come and See

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

### Readings: Revelation 5.1-10; John 1.43-end

Yesterday I went to visit Ralph, our head verger, who has been in hospital for the last four weeks. Despite the paralysis in his arms and leg and still being unable to walk, he seemed full of joy as he told me about the excellent care he has been receiving. When I told him that I had to get back home to write a sermon for today, he said, “Ah – you should preach what I always try to preach – it’s the sermon of St Francis.” “What’s that?” I asked. “Well,” he said “Francis was walking through the countryside noticing everything: the sky, the colours of the plants, the trees, the birds, and then on into the town through the market, stopping as he went to greet and talk with those he passed. ‘Hurry up!’ said one of his fellow Brothers, ‘you are going to be late for preaching the Gospel!’ ‘Gospel?’ Francis said. “I have already preached it on the way to the Church.’ “You see,” said Ralph, “Francis said we should always preach the Gospel but use words only when we have to.” “That’s rich advice coming from you,” I said. “You’ve always been a great chatterbox.” “Yes,” he said, “but it’s been amazing how lying in this hospital bed, not in a church at all, I still feel God has had a purpose for my being here. For example, there was a man in a bed over there who told me he wanted to know more about the Christian faith. He started reading the Gideon Bible and said he was going to read all the way through from Genesis. I explained to him that way he’d probably get lost, and that it was better to begin with the Gospel of Mark and then cut to the Acts of the Apostles, and then read the Letter to the Corinthians – since then we have had great discussions and he’s been so thankful for my help. Then Jerry, one of the clients at the Connection has been into visit me, and Martin from the Box Office, and members of the choir, Janet and James, Mike and Ruth and so many from the congregation. And over the Christmas period there were all the Islamic nurses on duty and we have had such interesting conversations.” Yesterday Ralph seemed lit up like a beacon, and I realised he was also preaching the Gospel for me too. This is the season of Epiphany, the time when, like those Magi from the East, we are called to open our eyes to the signs of God’s presence in our midst.

John’s Gospel begins, as we heard so many times in our Christmas carol services, with a prologue, which is a poem, cosmic in scale, linking the birth of Jesus with all of time. There is a taste of God’s glory among us. This poem is like a magnificent overture celebrating the birth of the Word made Flesh. Contrast this opening to the second part of Chapter One of John’s Gospel. From the vast reach of prologue the second half is suddenly specific, local, human – more like January – quieter. The narrative begins with John the Baptist, stepping aside, answering his questioners not with any exaggerated claims about himself, but the exact opposite: “I am not...” – “I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah, not even a prophet, simply a voice crying out in the wilderness,” a signpost pointing to Christ. This Word, which brought everything into being, is standing among them, unknown, in small local place: Bethany, across the Jordan. It could just as easily be Clapham across the Thames, or Tottenham or Pimlico, or a hospital ward in Queen’s Square. The Son of God is standing among us, unknown. And then he enters the story in the most simple way: “The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and declared “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He simply walks towards us. It is as though you could so easily have missed him if John had not pointed him out, and yet this is the one who will take away the sin of the world. What an incredible statement. This unknown man, setting us free in our deepest secret selves – in the way we most, most long to be free. Would you too not like to meet this person?

I love this section of Chapter One; it is so simple, so without artifice. The next day John is standing with his disciples and as he watches, Jesus walks by. He just walks by – the Gospel without words – but John again points him out, gently stands aside and points his own two disciples towards him. Jesus turns and asks them, “What are you looking for?” They ask, “Where are you staying?” He answers, “Come and see.” And they saw where he was staying and they remained with him. “Come and see.” It is the quiet invitation extended to all of us. To find where Jesus is staying, where he has made his home here among us. It is such an openhearted yet intimate invitation. God, not a theory, or ideology, or set of commandments, not a book we must obey or in a shrine at we must worship, but Jesus, who makes his home with us and invites us to come and see, and stay with him.

And now we reach the point in this first chapter of John from which today’s Gospel is taken. Again, it sounds so ordinary, as if it could happen to anyone. And it could. The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Look how the circle of those who come and see is widening. Jesus’ presence is like a pebble thrown into a pond – the ripples widen outwards. He is always at the centre of this circle. The ripples which reach out, inclusive of all, also return to him, calling the disciples into a circle of intimacy. Here we have an image of John’s Gospel’s concept of Church, not a hierarchical institution, but a community focused around the presence of Christ at its centre. Philip finds Nathaniel and tells him about Jesus. “Can any good come out of Nazareth?” Nathaniel asks. “Come and see,” says Philip, echoing the same call as Jesus. How common is that among we who so often take life for granted, and have grown sceptical or cynical of goodness? Can there really be such a thing as true goodness without strings, or with no sting in its tail? “Come and see.” No force here, but the most beautiful invitation of your life.

At a time in my life when I was discovering the meaning of my own faith, I read a book about John’s Gospel which had a profound effect on me and began my deeper love for this Gospel. The book is by Stephen Verney, and it’s called *Water into Wine*. In John’s Gospel, Verney points out, John is describing events taking place on two different levels or dimensions: what women and men are doing on the physical level, and at the same time what God is doing, at the level of the Spirit. John’s Gospel captures these two levels of existence – the above and the below – eternity and mortal life, both present now. The Greek words which he uses for this above and below, up and down are *ano* and *kato*. But John is not talking about a spatial dimension. When John talks of *ano* and *kato*, he is describing two orders. The order of *kato* is the ruling principle of the dictator: *me*, my egocentric ego, and the pattern of society based on this order is people competing with manipulating and trying to gain advantage, defend possession, and control each other. How easy it is for us to be sucked into this culture of fear, politicking and ultimate loss of the true self. But in the rule of *ano*, the ruling principle is the Spirit of Love, of seeing, really seeing, the divine other; the pattern of society here is one of radical compassion – people freed to give each other what they really are; seeing the gift of God’s divinity within humanity and within all creation.

These two orders are so often at war with each other. How can there be a meeting of both the *ano* and the *kato*, the eternity of God and the ‘here and now’ of our own lives? John, the writer of this Gospel says ‘I have seen and touched the answer. Come and see.’ Jesus says to Nathaniel in our Gospel passage today “Very Truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” He is reminding them of the story of Jacob’s dream. Jacob, the founding father of the people of Israel, who was a devious character, deceiving his father, cheating his brother Esau from his birthright, and later robbing his father-in-law. Yet here was a man who knew both the *ano* and the *kato*, the above and below, and all night wrestled with the angel of God, longing to know God and as he fought God, crying out “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” It was this man who dared to look both into the depths and heights of his own humanity who, in a night of crisis in the desert, had a dream of a ladder which rested on the earth and with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God going up and down upon it. Here was the bridge for Jacob, carrying his broken humanity to God, carrying God’s presence to earth. Now in our Gospel Jesus says to his followers, “you are going to see the reality of that ladder, the reality of

the dream which Jacob dreamt” because Jesus is going to become for us that ladder, that to and fro of God’s relationship of love with us. He says to us that through him the below and the above, the human and the divine, the mortal and the immortal, can be reunited.

I have been thinking of the Epiphanies in my own life in the last few weeks, the signs of God – that ladder – the above entering into the below, the below becoming part of the above. Travelling across the world on an aeroplane is always for me an existential experience. There you are sitting in a tube in the sky crossing continents, around you everything is organised and you are being fed and watered and watch entertainment programmes on your screen, but always the knowledge that only a few centimetres away on the other side is eternity and you would be dust. When we examine our lives, our own epiphanies some are radiant with hope and joy, others are more painful recognitions of our mortality. I think of the prayers we will say for David Heals from the National Portrait Gallery here in this church tomorrow. David was killed by a truck while crossing the road on the Thursday before Christmas. Yesterday Katherine and I stood on the edge of the kerb close to where he died saying prayers for God’s healing love and peace to be present there on the road at that place of tragedy and for all those grieving and traumatised to be comforted - the longing for David to be taken up into the greatness of God’s love and God’s comfort to come down. I think of Swee Ang, present with us today, whose husband Francis died suddenly at the end of last year, a man who had spent his life campaigning for justice and human rights – here in the UK helping to set up a charity for Medical Aid for Palestine and much more. Returning from my holiday I had found a message from his wife whose own work as an orthopaedic surgeon in both Lebanon and Gaza has been the Gospel in action. ‘I am sending you £1,000’ she wrote, ‘for the St Martin’s Christmas Appeal, in memory of Francis.’ The Gospel he lived continuing after his death. Another present in the kato: I saw the beauty of the golden light of this winter morning, and Christ’s Gospel sometimes hidden but present. And Christ’s call to “Come and see.” The Gospel is still being preached all around us in countless epiphanies, if only we have eyes to see the signs. How will we preach this Gospel using words only when we have to?