

Our text for today is any many ways a reflection on the text we looked at last Sunday. Technically, it's about the same event – the baptism of Jesus – but with a different take on the subject.

John's gospel was written after the Christian Church had been around for a couple of generations and had time to think about what all that had happened, and it offers theological reflections on the meaning of Jesus' miracles and sayings. In fact, John's gospel is rather light on miracles – it contains only seven. It is often John's gospel that is used to introduce the Christian message to unbelievers purely because of its eloquence and precision.

John uses the baptism of Jesus to introduce God-made-flesh to the world stage, and as Jesus walks toward him, John proclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

With this one image, John ties together two main images from the Hebrew Bible. One is that of the Passover lamb whose blood was smeared around Israelite doorways to mark them out for protection from the violence of God's wrath.

John introduces the final, ultimate Passover lamb to us. The blood of this sacrifice is meant to mark us all, to free us from the pain and weakness that chains us in a broken world. John announces, "Here is the final, ultimate Lamb, whose sacrifice will mean that no more blood need ever be shed" and it turns out that John is pointing to none other than God in the flesh. This image, that of the sacrificial lamb, is more than a reference to the deliverance of God's people from slavery. It is also a prophetic symbol, and John's words remind us of the songs of the suffering servant from Isaiah. Isaiah tells us of the coming servant of God who would bring hope to the hopeless. He will come, not with strength and shouting, but instead with silence, "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter." But the Lamb of God would come not just for Israel, but would allow God's love, God's redemption, God's salvation, to "reach to the end of the earth."

The mission of Jesus is to bring all the people of the world back to God, their Creator, their Beginning and their End.

The mission of Jesus is also our mission. We cannot be good disciples of Jesus if we are not also good apostles. To be a good Christian necessarily entails being a good evangeliser. We must share our faith with others, help them to know Jesus and his Gospel, and to experience directly the love of God.

Jesus chose an interesting bunch of people to set up for this task! They were not as smart as some of the third rate philosophers in Rome. Maybe some of them could read and write. There were perhaps street wise, but if you were going to announce the nearness of the Kingdom of God would you surround yourselves with such dunderheads? They were utterly insensitive to Jesus's spiritual message and interested only in the power and prestige they were going to get in this Kingdom (which they didn't understand at all). One of them was a thief and 10 of them were cowards.

Mind you, what has changed? Is our church membership or its leadership any different? Perhaps Jesus just wanted a human church!!

It was as difficult then as it is today to decide for discipleship rationally – which is why the first disciples were chosen for their intellectual simplicity. Jesus simply invited them, as he does us, to “Come and see”.

He taught them a new set of values and a new world view, and he taught them about suffering and grief and rejection. His invitation to “Come and see” introduced them to the paradoxes of the spiritual life, such as: gaining our life by losing our life, enjoying true abundance by giving away our possessions, and becoming followers of the all-powerful one who emptied himself of power.

You really need to “come and see” in order to understand – or even begin to understand that without personal sacrifice, our lives can become meaningless, focused more on the accumulation of material goods than on sharing the love that comes from God.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand?

*To answer the question we shall have to go to him,
for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who
bids us follow him, knows the journey's end. But we
do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy.*

Those first disciples were not called to go somewhere in particular—they were called to go anywhere Jesus might lead. They were not called to renounce this thing or that thing, but to be able to walk away from anything and everything, for only then would they be free—only then would their lives fully belong to Jesus.

In his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World* John Stott points out, the words “mission” or “missionary” typically evoke a certain image: The missionary [is] often caricatured as standing under a palm tree, wearing a pith helmet and declaiming the gospel to a group of ill-clad “natives” sitting respectfully around him on the ground. Thus the traditional image of the missionary [is] of the preacher, and a rather paternalistic kind of preacher at that.

Stott observed that this romantic image of mission implies that the primary, if not exclusive, function of mission is evangelism. However, an alternative view holds that mission should be defined solely as engaging in what is today commonly referred to as social justice – redressing economic disparity, oppression, racial inequality, and other social ills. Instead of choosing one of these two extremes, Stott suggests we understand mission as a partnership of evangelism and social action: The expression “Great Commission” is usually understood to refer to Jesus’s words in Matthew 28

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

The exclusively evangelistic understanding of mission is derived in large part from these verses. In the Gospel of John, though, Jesus is also recorded as using more expansive language: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21).

As disciples, we need to pull these two strands together: to learn from Jesus the message of the Kingdom and to promote its outworking. Only by getting alongside Jesus, and answering his invitation to “*Come and see*” can we hope to get the message across to others.

Pope Francis says he wants to spark a process of mission in the church that is more burning, joyful, generous, bold, full of love to the end, and full of contagious life, but knows it will be *insufficient if the fire of the Spirit doesn't burn in their hearts*.

He calls them *evangelizers with Spirit* who open themselves without fear to the Spirit's action and who find in that Holy Spirit of Jesus the power to announce the truth of the Gospel with audacity and in every time and place, even when it is against the current of today's culture.

An honest stock-taking of our spirituality may unveil the selfish, ego-centric motives that often direct our lives. To rise above these we need to recognise something outside of and larger than ourselves, the God who cares for us and for the whole human community. Can we listen to John's call to restore what is broken, and Jesus' call, to bring light to the world? Do we see that it is with our cooperation that the Lamb can remove the “sin of the world?”