

Sermon for 18th January 2026, Year A, Epiphany 2

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Sermon

Last week we had Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus. This week we hear John's version, and it is quite different, not least because there's no actual baptism described!

And whereas in Matthew's version, John the Baptist clearly knows and respects Jesus before he baptises him, even suggesting that Jesus should be baptising *him*, not the other way around, in John's Gospel the Baptist says that he didn't actually know Jesus – or at least didn't know he was the Messiah – until he saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove. In fact, he says this was why he was baptising – in order that the Messiah might be revealed. There are perhaps echoes here of when Samuel had all the sons of Jesse pass in front of him until God said, “this boy David is the one who will be king.”

In Matthew's gospel – and in Mark and Luke – Jesus is telling John what to do. But in John's gospel, we see that the Baptist is still actively seeking the Messiah. He is quite a famous personality in his own right, much more famous than Jesus who is still almost unknown. Leaders are coming to see John even from the capital Jerusalem, asking if he is Elijah returned, or even the Messiah himself, which he, of course, denies.

When Jesus arrives to be baptised, John sees the Holy Spirit descend on him, and from that point on he sends his own disciples to join Jesus. Yes, in John's gospel, John the Baptist actually chooses Jesus' first disciples for him. John uses his own fame to promote Jesus. He is the 'A-list' celebrity saying, “you should really check out *this* guy – I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals.”

And so, two of John's entourage - one of whom was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother - follow John's advice and begin to follow Jesus, at first trailing behind him at a distance, uncertain, perhaps as we do when we first start coming to church, or first start receiving Holy Communion. We're not sure if we belong, not sure exactly why we've come, attracted by something but we don't know what. Perhaps we hope not to be noticed while we figure out why we're here.

But Jesus notices them immediately. He turns and sees the two of John's disciples who are now following him. "What are you looking for?" he asks.

Not "who are you looking for" but "what." It's both an invitation to those who are hesitantly hovering on the margins, and also a challenge and an examination. Jesus challenges them to reflect on what they're truly seeking. He doesn't let them hide in the background. They are immediately the centre of his attention. Is that what they wanted? Is that what they longed for but were terrified of – the attention of someone who knows them, values them and loves them? I doubt they'd really thought it through.

All John the Baptist has told them is that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who will take away the sin of the world, and who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. But given the difficulty the Church has had over the centuries in understanding what that all means, I'm pretty sure that those first followers of Jesus probably didn't really understand it either.

They were living under Roman occupation and perhaps what they really longed for more than anything else was a Messiah King to lead a resistance army and defeat their oppressors. The prophecies seemed clear – if now was not the time when the Messiah would come and destroy their enemies with the power of God and restore justice to the holy land, then when?

But what about us? Here we all are this morning, in this splendid building, built by previous generations of miners, loved and cared for by ourselves. Why are we here?

“Where two or three are gathered together,” says the Lord, “there I am in the midst of them.” Jesus is here in the midst of us. He turns, sees us here, and asks, “What are you looking for?”

So, what do we say? What comes to mind? Do we have an immediate response, or do our minds go blank? Do we hope the preacher will swiftly move on? What if she were to wander down the aisle and look at us meaningfully.

What are you looking for? What are you looking for?

Is this something we ever think about and reflect on?

The disciples’ response is not very helpful to us in understanding *their* motivation. When Jesus asks, “what are you looking for?” they simply reply, “Where are you staying?” It sounds like they’re avoiding the question, but perhaps what they’re really saying is, “What we want is to spend time with you to find out if you’re the one who can make everything better.” And Jesus replies, “Come and see.”

This is the invitation Jesus continually makes to all of us. Perhaps we have some longing or wound in our heart that our society does not seem to touch or heal. Perhaps we cannot speak about it aloud, perhaps we can’t even put a name to it, or understand it, or describe it, but I am absolutely sure that in every one of us, whatever age we are, whatever our circumstances, whether we have a large family or none at all, there remains a longing for *something* that always seems just beyond us.

For each of us it’s slightly different. If I asked each of you to tell the person next to you what it is you most long for – and don’t worry, I’m not actually going to do that – we’d probably all have different answers, but I suspect that behind all

those hopes and dreams and longings is a yearning to experience unconditional love, and to meet the God who graciously offers it.

Those first disciples didn't really understand the path they were on. They wanted a Messiah who would liberate them from the Romans. Jesus went off in a completely different direction and liberated them from selfishness and isolation instead. By the end, when the Holy Spirit came on them at Pentecost, they finally realised that what they had been looking for wasn't violent revolution but the kingdom of God, the community of love and forgiveness where all are welcome, and where all are transformed both by being welcomed into that community, and by learning how to offer that welcome to others.

This is why the question "What are you looking for?" is so important. We don't need to know the answer – and certainly not straightaway – but when we ask ourselves the question, that's when we begin to change and become the person we long to be. For whatever we are looking and longing for, that is what by God's grace we will eventually become.

"Come and see."