

Pastor Ulrich Noetzel Sermon at Hannover International Worship

20th January 2008

Septuagesimae / Epiphany 2

Old Testament: Isaiah 49.1-7

Gospel: John 1.29-42

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

“Come and see my uncle’s carbed factory.” “I make you gude price.” – “Come and see!”
“Where are you from?” “Where are you staying?” “Come in, I give you tea”.

Come and see. When travelling in the Near East you will get many invitations like these. They can mean that someone is following the sacred custom of hospitality. Or it can just be a trick to lure you into some tourist trap: “Come and see my shop! I sell carbed from Bedouin...”

The surprising thing about today’s gospel is that there is so little surprising in it. Almost everything is normal about it: two men following another, curious who he might be. This man engages them in conversation: “What do you want?” – And their question is quite a normal question that any stranger or tourist might be asked: “Where are you staying?”

I can picture the scene, imagine how it was, near the river Jordan, the home of John the Baptist and his disciples. These are just the natural things to say.

And then: “Come and see” – an invitation. A real offer of hospitality for these two disciples of John the Baptist.

“Come and see” – Jesus isn’t selling anything. He just invites these two men, who went to find out about this new man Jesus, whom John had called “the lamb of God”.

And so they spend the day together. Because there is no rush in matters of hospitality. There is no rush anyway in countries where it is very hot during the day. We are not told where they were staying. Was Jesus staying at a house? Did he have a tent? Or were they just sitting in the shade of a tree?

Neither are we told what they were doing. Did Jesus ask them lots of questions? Did they ask him lots of questions? Were they sitting in silence together or did they discuss the Scriptures? Whatever they did, they must have had a good time together. Because the first thing Andrew did after leaving Jesus was to get to his brother Simon. He doesn't waste any words. He just informs him: "We have found the Messiah!"

I admit that these are not ordinary words, which you regularly encounter in the streets or markets of the Near East.

Here stops our ordinary everyday story. Here begins the extraordinary story!

The Messiah changes everything. Simon finds that out as soon as he meets Jesus. Jesus knows about him: "You are Simon, son of John. – But you will be called Cephas, which means 'rock'." Simon gets a new name. Because Jesus knows him, even before Simon has had a chance to get to know Jesus.

Two disciples are mentioned by name in this passage: Andrew and Simon. Both stand for different aspects in this story.

Andrew is one of Jesus first disciples. He brings his brother Simon to the Lord. You could call him the first missionary.

Simon is the first whose life is changed by Jesus: he gets a new name.

There are three points I want to talk about today in greater depth:

One is our own mission,
the other is the meaning of discipleship,
and the third is our own calling.

St John's story of how Jesus got his first disciples is quite different from the stories as they are told in the other gospels.

There Jesus calls his disciples and this calling takes the form of a command, which cannot be resisted: Come follow me, you shall be fishers of men. – It is like Jesus commanding the sea to be still. Jesus comes as the Lord of all Creation and His call cannot be resisted.

John's version of the story is much gentler. Jesus seems only marginally involved. He appears, but none of the action originates from him. People are drawn to him.

I think this story is one, which we can far better relate to. Very few of us experience direct Divine commands.

But many of us can remember how other people told us about their experience with Jesus.

John paints a realistic picture of how the Christian faith is spread amongst the people.

Someone says: “This is the lamb of God” or “We have found the Messiah”.

We probably didn’t hear these exact words, but apart from that, this is what happened to us:

Somebody told us about Jesus. And many of us have been doing exactly the same: telling other people about Jesus.

This is our experience! Knowledge about God is passed on. We go to talk to other people like Andrew who went to find his brother Simon.

We try to point people in the right direction like John who said to his disciples: “Look! The lamb of God!”

We invite people “Come and see!” to share our life and our experience. To see what it is all about.

Faith grows in the interaction of people. Not in the big miracles. Not in lengthy teaching, nor in a special display of holiness. In our story, discipleship comes out of just a few words:

Come and see!

It does not take much in our reading this morning to make somebody a follower of Christ. We must keep that in mind for our own lives and our own attempts at mission.

Don’t be afraid to try it out!

It is not complicated to invite a stranger to church. Or to make somebody feel at home: come and see!

It just takes a few words to point somebody in the right direction: this is the lamb of God! It might be life changing for someone!

Or to go and get my brother, because I have found the Messiah. A few steps and a few words.

Could be a headline for us as well: Come and see!

Come and see if it works, inviting other people!

Come and see! – I am convinced that these words will contribute more to the future of our church than all our fundraising activities taken together.

Come and share our life, so that you can see, what church is about. Come and we will share our time with you and will see what faith means.

Come and you will see.

However, this story tells us more than just an effective mission strategy. The language used is not only the language of the street and the marketplace, but it is also the language of theology. There is always another layer of meaning in St John's gospel.

It tells us about the true meaning of discipleship. When John's disciples follow Jesus, the word used in the Greek literally means "walking behind" but it is also the technical term for being a disciple, just as we can say in English someone is a follower of Jesus.

Andrew and his friend are true disciples from the first moment. As soon as they decide to follow John's advice they are disciples of Jesus.

When Jesus asks them "What do you want?" this isn't only an apt reaction to somebody walking behind you. "What do you seek?" would be a more appropriate translation. Jesus knows that it is not mere curiosity, which makes John's disciples follow Jesus. It is not a search for the latest thrill, but "seeking." The search for a deeper understanding, a meaning for their lives.

They are seeking indeed. They answer Jesus' question with another question: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" It only seems puzzling until we remember how important the words "staying" or "remaining" are in John's gospel. Both are the same word in the original Greek. John the Baptist remarked a few verses before this morning's reading that the spirit stayed on Jesus. And Jesus is always stressing the importance of staying or remaining in him – for example in the picture of the vine: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15.5) The disciples' question after Jesus' abode is in reality an admission that they have found their source of life. They ask him where he is staying because **they** want to stay. They want to be where he is. Where shall we go? You have words of eternal life!

"Where are you staying, we want to stay with you." – So Jesus invites them: "Come and you will see!"

Jesus' reply implies a deeper seeing. More than visual perception but to see who Jesus really is. They come and stay with him and they will gain a deeper insight.

3. But there is more to it than insight. When Simon at last joins Jesus and the other disciples, he gets a new name. Jesus says something about him and his life, which lies in the future. Something, which Simon didn't know before. He is going to be the rock – Cephas.

It is interesting that in St John's Gospel this name change takes place straight away, at their first encounter. In the other gospels Jesus gives Simon his new name after the transfiguration and after Simon has realized who Jesus really is: "You are the Christ!"

In a sense we can suppose that the same thing happened here – in a far less dramatic way. Andrew told him: "we have found the Messiah" – and Simon acknowledges this by coming with him. An implicit way of saying: you are the Christ...

There still remains this important difference that in John's gospel everything is clear from the beginning. The song of creation and incarnation at the opening of the gospel leaves no doubt about who Jesus is.

And likewise Jesus leaves Simon in no doubt about what his calling is: He is to be Peter, or Cephas or the rock on which the church will be built.

This leads to the question of who we are. We probably have a pretty good idea of who we are ourselves. But what is God's idea of us? Maybe it is different from ours? What is his calling for us?

If we just go back to our Old Testament reading for a moment. Isaiah (like Jeremiah) has an awareness of how special he is: "Before I was born, the Lord called me." (and we can also remember the stories of Jesus, John, Mary and Elisabeth)
"From my birth he has made mention of my name".

Peter, on the other hand, is known as Simon from birth. He gets his new name later on in life from Jesus.

I wonder whether he'd say the same thing as Isaiah...

Isaiah's calling and his knowledge about his calling stands in stark contrast to the almost casual way the callings are shown in the fourth gospel.

And what about us? Who are we? Are we the ones we think we are, or has God a special name for us? One that relates to the special purpose he has for us?

Maybe we don't have a knowledge of our own calling from before birth.

Maybe we do not remember day and time of our first encounter with Jesus (like somebody did in John's gospel: "the tenth hour")

But maybe we realize that God has greater things for us in store.

At least this is how I read this passage from Isaiah. We may think we have laboured in vain (like Isaiah did), spent our strength in vain and for nothing. Yet our reward is with God and what is due to us is in the Lord's hand.

It sounds a bit frightening what God has in store for Isaiah: it is too small to restore the tribes of Jacob.

He is to be the light to the world, so that he brings salvation to the ends of the world.

Would we not be rather more content with Andrew's option: bringing the good news to our brother Simon in the next village? Rather than having to go to the end of the world?

If we look at the outcome – I don't think there is a discrepancy. Andrew may have only gone to the next village to get his brother. (And in his later life he remains the man who brings people to Jesus.) But by doing so he has done his part in the kingdom of God.

And the rest is history, as they say.

The light of the world has gone to the ends of the world!

This is what the season of Epiphany is about. The light has appeared before all the world.

It has also appeared for us and in us.

It is our calling to let this light shine.

In our church, the season of epiphany ended yesterday. But in other traditions it goes on until the beginning of lent. In our lives, epiphany should never end.

The light of epiphany has to shine and it will shine.

It shines in us and it shines through us.

It is part of what we are.

It cannot be hidden

and because of this light, we are as special as Isaiah.

And when we say “come and see” it is not an invitation to buy some old carpet, but to see the light of the world.

Amen.