

Sermon on 17th January 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Lord, send us your Spirit, open our hearts, and ignite us with your words. Amen!

'Come and see!' When words are not quite enough, we have to see and feel what the message is. Last Sunday, we felt the water on our fingertips, as we remembered our baptism, and Anna encouraged us so wonderfully. I really appreciated that – it helped lifting the general winter and lockdown blues that descend at times.

However, after the service, I received a good bleating by Barbara, demanding to know why she was not baptised! I quoted the final verses of Matthew to her: *'Make disciples of all nations,... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'* To what she replied: 'What? Am I not a disciple, always attending services and always following the good Shepherds' commands?' Well, I said, this is indeed true; however, there is still a bit of a difference between humans and sheep.

But she wouldn't have it, and said: 'There is not such a big difference between humans and animals, because we animals can be as kind and empathetic as people, sometimes even more so!' That struck, I had to agree. But then I reminded her of Genesis 1: It is humans, who are charged with looking after the creation, right?! In reply she shouted: 'But they are making a mess of it! BAAA!'

At this point, I nearly gave in, but then I realised that today's readings could help me: Barbara, I said, remember that Jesus called humans to follow him, not sheep. Sheep are always metaphorical. That shut her up, and since then she has sulked all the time, telling me that she is merely a metaphorical sheep when I ask her to do something.

It's not easy, and I wondered what good is a minister who is losing a theological debate with a sheep.

Let's face it: just talking about theology doesn't really do the trick. None of the disciples of Jesus were talked into following him. So why did they?

Jesus *'found Philip and said to him, "Follow me"'*. And Philip did. Why? Would you just drop all you're doing, and follow a guy in sandals just like that? Would you? We will never know what Nathaniel was doing under this fig-tree, and why he found Jesus' words that he had seen him there so compelling. If only John would have told us more!

But actually, the answer is given several times in the Bible, as in our Psalm reading today: *'For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.'* And we hear the same from Isaiah in chapter 49: *'The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.'* In John 10, we hear of the Good Shepherd, who *'calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.'* Yes, Barbara, metaphorical sheep!

So when we read the verb 'to know' and 'Jesus' in the same sentence, it tells us that when Jesus sees people, he knows them through and through, not in the more superficial way humans tend to know each other. Just like in our Psalm today: *'You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You ... are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.'*

Jesus sees these men for what they truly are, and they know it. But that's not all: when the eyes of Jesus and the prospective follower meet, something else is happening. I mean, I would find it rather uncomfortable if somebody would know everything about me just like that. But the encounter with Jesus is different, because Jesus appreciates, approves, and loves. It's all about personal relationship. In this electric moment, when eyes were locking, these people felt whole for once, and a new way of life was spread out before them. How could they refuse? Give the right answer, and it will change your life.

Little Samuel in our Old Testament reading had a similar experience: He was able to perceive something nobody else could, not even the old priest. Eli had ceased to expect God to speak, his diminishing eyesight a metaphor of his failing internal vision, therefore, he didn't recognise what was happening to Samuel. Samuel had no idea either, but he was open to what was happening.

Which makes me wonder: Are we really open to what God is trying to tell us? These days, do we actually expect to hear God's voice, or have we given up on that? Is this the reason why we sometimes feel God is not really here, and does not care about our trials and tribulations? Hmmmm.

In the Bible, it is often very unlikely people who hear God's call and follow Him. Small people, insignificant in the eyes of men; and yet, they are known and valued by God.

As you can imagine, the notion of being called out is something very much at the forefront of any minister-to-be. I remember very well when we sang Dan Schutte's hymn 'Here I am Lord' at training weekends, and that I always had tears running down my cheeks. What – me? I am such an unlikely person! I cannot do this. And here I am.

The best line of the song is certainly the self-doubting: "*Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord?*" A doubt the first followers of Christ didn't seem to have. They dropped everything and followed Jesus. '*Come and see.*'

So the question for us is: What can we see? Where can we discern God at work? How can we tell others '*Come and see*', because we have seen something that tells of Him?

Every time in the last 16 months, when I came to St. Brandon's, in person, or online, I did see: All your lovely faces, expectant and eager to hear the word of God. A parish full of vibrant Christian life. Fabulous. I tell you, the experiences I made here will sustain me in my future ministry. Thank you.

Which brings me back to Barbara, an unlikely member of this congregation, and yet, fully accepted. When I brought her along, I never thought she would be able to develop her own distinctive ministry. She has taught me to be more expectant. And Jesus did tell us, we should expect so much more: '*You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man!*' Jacob's ladder comes into mind, this connecting element between heaven and earth, and we are going to see it, too!

Jesus' invitation is there for all of us: '*Come and see!*' So let us open our eyes and ears, and say: '*Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.*' Amen.