

# Come and See ...

## *... an invitation is required*

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 12 January 2020, in Beverley Minster.*

*1 Corinthians 1:1–9; John 1:29–42*

During the week of Christmas itself, we must have had getting on for 3,000 people attending services here at the minster. Most of them, of course, folk who don't come at any other time. And this year we made a point of encouraging folk who don't usually come to church to consider following it up afterwards, by coming on the 'Start' course in January. So in each of the talks and sermons given over Christmas, Ben and Tim and Wendy and I took the opportunity to flag up the opportunity presented by the 'Start' course to come and think about the possible meaning and relevance of Jesus Christ beyond Christmas. And when we had the first session of the course a couple of weeks ago, it was attended by a grand total of three people, all of whom are already members of the Beverley Minster congregation, and while I hasten to add that there is nothing at all wrong with those people and they are very welcome and I hope and pray they will find the course helpful and stimulating, nevertheless, as an exercise in trying to engage the world beyond the regular Sunday congregation, it hasn't really worked. And the ministry team has been reflecting on this and trying to ponder what lessons we should be learning: is it that the language of running a course sounds too threatening and reminds people too much of school? Is it that people are no longer really interested in what the church says, but are more interested in what it does? And the Panorama programme last week will have highlighted the importance of that. Is it just that everyone's busy at Christmas and the opportunity simply doesn't seem urgent enough to make a top priority in the New Year, and so it just gets lost.

The lesson that I take from this myself is that I don't think the Minster is going to grow, simply because it's running the right kind of events or developing a new style of worship, and it isn't going to grow because it's got more clergy or even because the buildings are better heated. No, I think the inescapable lesson I draw from the

low numbers at the start course, is that the church will only grow if its members invite other people to come, and are willing to journey with them. And that's really the message of this morning's gospel reading: a whole series of invitations and of people accompanying one another. Right at the start of John's gospel, at the beginning of Jesus's ministry, there are people willing to testify about Jesus and encourage others to discover him for themselves. So we have John the Baptist saying, "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the son of God." Now, interestingly, John has only just identified who Jesus is: twice in the preceding verses he says, "I myself did not know him." And I think that ought to resonate with all church members who say, "Well, of course, you know, I'm not really very sure, but you know, I think there's something in it, but I don't feel very confident about talking about it or sharing it with others." You're at one with John the Baptist in that - "I myself did not know him."

But there was something in the experience of baptising Jesus that convinced John that this was the Messiah, the chosen one of God. There was a real spiritual experience at the heart of John's ministry. But John himself probably wouldn't have been in a strong position to answer lots of questions about it. His starting point is simply to acknowledge that Jesus has made a difference to his life. So I wonder, can we do the same? We don't actually have to be theologians or preachers or great debaters: all we need is enough of a faith, to say that Jesus has made a difference to us; that our faith matters to us at some level; that without Jesus, our lives would be poorer.

That's actually all you need to be an evangelist.

And the next day in the passage, John points out Jesus to his disciples and says, "Look, here is the lamb of God." Now the language he used probably isn't the sort of language we'd use today. I don't know what folk today would understand by the 'Lamb of God', but it was a terminology that was meaningful to the people of John's Day. And my point this morning is not what John said, but who he said it to. Because he wasn't talking to complete strangers. He wasn't standing on a soapbox and shouting at whoever happened to be passing by. He said it to his disciples, to people who knew him and respected him and trusted him. And so for us, the question is not 'What can I say about Jesus,' but rather 'To whom may I say it?' The question is,

'Who do I know who respects me and trusts me and knows me?' Who are the people to whom I can mention the name of Jesus and expect to be taken seriously

And then later in the passage, Jesus himself makes an invitation to those two disciples of John. When he sees them showing an interest, he asks them what they're looking for, and when they flounder for an answer, he simply invites them to come and see: no lecture; no hard sell; no embarrassing talk about giving their lives to him; just an invitation to come and see for themselves, to spend time with him on their own terms, to find out at firsthand. And following that, Andrew invites his brother Simon to come and meet Jesus: the result of that is a new beginning for Simon, who finds he has a deeper identity as Simon Peter, the Rock, and this name Jesus gives him, Cephas, is the Greek word for rock. And this, it seems, is how the church begins: it begins with the sense that Jesus makes a difference; and then it's followed with a willingness on the part of Jesus's friends to invite their own friends, simply to come and see.

And that surely is how the church continues to grow, when it does. If we know that Jesus makes a difference and if we're willing to invite others to try out the community where such an experience can be expected, we shall grow. But if we don't have that conviction or if we think we can delegate the responsibility for inviting others to the clergy or to somebody else, then we shall inevitably decline. And there's really no great mystery about it: the gospel is all about relationships; It's about trust and belonging and love. And so the people who matter to us, the people who trust us will be people, surely, we wish to want to include in the community life of this place. We can't share the gospel without getting personally involved, but it doesn't have to be complicated.

In a couple of months time in the middle of March, the Archbishop is inviting bishops from across the northern province to join him for a weekend of mission and evangelism around the Diocese of York. And this mission is called appropriately 'Come and See'. And in this deanery of Beverley, we shall be welcoming a team led by the Bishop of Newcastle: there will be a program of events and meetings and services in a variety of venues, where people will have the chance to hear a bit more about Jesus. And it should be very exciting, it's a wonderful opportunity.

But if it's going to be any good, we need to be praying for it now and praying also about who we might invite to the right kind of event, not just signposting people, but offering to go with them. And I think it's quite straightforward to say to folk, "Look, you know, this is happening. I think it's going to be good. I'm going to go. Would you like to come with me?" There's really nothing forced or unnatural about that.

And so you'll hear me talking about this more often: if the church is going to be a sign of God's kingdom, we're going to have to get better at inviting other people to join us - a growing church will be an 'invitational' church. And whether it's a 'Start' course or a family fun day, whether it's a concert, a quiz or a service for Mothering Sunday. Our mantra needs to be, "This is happening. It's going to be good. Will you come with me?" It's clear from the passage that John's disciples didn't know what they were looking for with any clarity, and neither do most people today. Those disciples just had a vague sense that Jesus was attractive because of what John had told them.

What helps them is the same thing that surely helps you and me on our journey, and could help our friends: not a book or a sermon; not good advice or a course of study; but a simple invitation - "Come and see." And those disciples spent the rest of the day with Jesus, as a result of which they got to know him a bit: the sense of attraction deepened; the sense that there was something real here; the sense that the love of God was at work.

And then they went and invited their friends, and the friends invited their friends, and so on, right down to those who first invited you or me.

So let's pray that we may be able to continue that pattern. Let's desire to be an invitational church. Let's encourage each other to draw near with faith and spend time with the Lord. Let's all of us '*come and see.*'

## Reading Texts

### 1 Corinthians 1:1–9

<sup>1</sup> Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, <sup>2</sup> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup> just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

### John 1:29–42

<sup>29</sup> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" <sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." <sup>32</sup> And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." <sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." <sup>34</sup> And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." <sup>35</sup> The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" <sup>39</sup> He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. <sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. <sup>41</sup> He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed ). <sup>42</sup> He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter ).