

## **Sermon for 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany 17**

May I speak in the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week, we celebrated the feast of the baptism of Christ whilst also having the privilege of being present at the baptism of the newest member of Christ's church in this place, baby Elouise. In one place, we encountered the foundation of Christian baptism and its latest beneficiary.

Today's reading from St John's Gospel begins with the same focus. Last week, we heard how, even before John the Baptist, spiritual cleansing of an individual through bathing took place after some act of uncleanness – such as touching a dead body.

John the Baptist offers an expanded view of what separates individuals from God and with it a broader approach to baptism. John, ever focussed on what God will do in the future, has a deep metaphysical understanding of the sinful capacity of all human beings to distance themselves from the goodness of God. So John calls every person into ritual cleansing, to be washed clean of their sins so that they may begin a new way of life living towards God the Father once again.

But John is clear that he is only paving the way for the future and it is John's revelation about Jesus that really transforms things. In the middle of a characteristic public statement, John makes clear that someone else is being sent by God to save his people; the person on whom the Spirit remains. This, God's messenger, will not only cleanse their bodies with water, he will also purify their souls with the Holy Spirit.

This is significant since it combines both the believer's good intention to turn over a new leaf with God's response to that – the gift of the Holy Spirit. From this point forward, this ritualistic act transforms into a new Christ-styled cleansing that we call baptism. In it the individual recognises their need to be more in tune with God, and as they turn to a new way of life, the Spirit rests upon them and draws them into the life of Christ. This is just as true for us today; It is certainly true of our baptism, but also whenever we take the initiative and begin doing what we can to move closer to God, so he rewards us with his guidance and comforter, the Holy Spirit.

In the second half of today's reading from John's Gospel, we hear of the calling of the first disciples. Foremost, we have two of John the Baptist's disciples, leaving John to follow Jesus. One of them, we are told, is

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. Andrew then goes to find his brother and tells him 'we have found the Messiah'.

Jesus, upon meeting Simon, acknowledges the whole of Simon's past and exactly where he comes from; everything that he has ever done and been, by identifying him as 'Simon, son of John'. In one short statement and acknowledgement, Christ peers into the depths of Simon's soul and with it deals with his past and all that might hold him back. With it, Jesus' path is clear to draw Simon into a new way of life in the Spirit. And as a mark of that change in direction Jesus renames him Peter. Simon Peter begins a new life as one of Jesus' followers, and with it a new name to boot. This tradition of name change continues today in our Christian tradition. A person may change their name at baptism, when they become a nun or a monk or at their inauguration if they are to become Pope.

These are just a few symbolic examples of what is true for all of us as we take the steps necessary to accept Christ's invite to follow him and find out more about what he reveals. But for most of us, this is a regular experience. Each time we slip away or take a wrong turn, this change in direction becomes necessary. It is why we have holy water at the door to the church – a reminder of our baptismal promises and our need to keep returning to Jesus and keep working at making the relationship strong.

This is also why private confession is important in our tradition, because it gives the individual to properly recognise where they have been going wrong, own it and begin the serious business of making changes for the future.

This is just what the first disciples in today's Gospel reading are doing, changing the direction of their lives and following Jesus. They are clearly searching for something that only a deepened relationship with God can heal. Jesus is the answer to that longing.

For the disciples, however, there is something about these encounters that goes far beyond the physical, and completely re-orientates their being. Jesus reveals something significant about our human nature; we are human beings, not human doings.

If, like me, you are a task junkie; one who generally overloads the diary and jumps from one task to the next, then I think we need to carefully assess our style of discipleship. What we see as being the most important traits of discipleship in the Gospels are not an ability to do lots of stuff in God's name, but attentiveness and awareness of God, and a desire to

listen, to learn and be taught. It is not that disciples don't act or respond to need around them, but action comes out of our attentiveness and stillness; not the other way around. God speaks to us in the silence of our hearts, if we are able to watch and listen. Only then, can we turn that into action.

When the first two disciples meet Jesus notice how they ask him 'where are you staying?'. On the face of it, this is such a straightforward question that it almost goes by unnoticed. They want to be where Jesus is so that they can begin being his students. So they simply ask where he is staying. But there is something deeper in that question too; 'Where are you staying?'. When we stay or settle, we quieten down, we become still, we observe and listen. Jesus' reveals a stillness at the centre of his psyche. The disciples don't just want to be in the same room as Jesus, they want to be in the same place, both physically and spiritually. They want what Jesus has. They want to learn his stillness and attentiveness to the Father. They want to be in complete communion with God.

So their inner being is the key. That is the whole purpose of their journey. They want to change from an existence separated from God to one of attentiveness towards God. Jesus is the only one who can bring such healing. They see in Jesus one whose entire being is transformative. Jesus reveals a new way of being, with an implanted stillness at the core of his soul – an attitude sufficiently free of the preoccupations of personal ego, that it is set free in the Spirit.

Recently we have been running a church study group on Tuesday evenings and we have been focussing on a book by Archbishop Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury until a few years ago. We have had great fun grappling with some very rich discussions. One such has been about the very nature of discipleship. Rowan asserts that 'what makes you a disciple is not turning up from time to time', or doing the odd good deed. 'Discipleship literally means being a student' for life;<sup>1</sup> grabbing every opportunity to grow closer to God and learn more about him.

So being a disciple of Christ, a Christian, is to be attentive to and aware of all that God is doing in Christ; to be a follower, a listener and a life-long learner. But more than that, discipleship brings a yearning for a stillness at the core of our souls; a stillness and healing that only Jesus can provide.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples* (London: SPCK, 2016), p.1-3

To conclude, discipleship is not a way of doing, it is a way of being. It is to sit in Jesus' presence, day by day, week, by week, and be attentive to him. It is to want to know more about Jesus, to follow him wherever he may lead and to allow him to find us when we are lost. It is an openness to the future he has for us: the fresh experiences every new day brings, the places he wishes us to go and things he wishes us to know.

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