

2nd Sunday of Epiphany, Year A

John 1.29-42

Christ Church, Chelsea

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Sam Hole

There are some questions that get straight to the heart of who we are. Or, to put that differently... I wonder, when have you been asked a question that brought you up short, that got you thinking, that you could only stumble out an answer to? I think, for example, of some years ago being sat with an older priest who halfway through our conversation simply asked: 'When are you vulnerable?' And in those four words I found myself seeing in new light the barriers I had erected to protect myself from hurt, the defences against my own vulnerability that at that time made it hard for me to sit with those who were vulnerable themselves. 'When are you vulnerable?' There was no easy answer to give, but much thinking to do.

The right questions have power. And Jesus, in the way he is portrayed in John's gospel, knew that. For John's text is full of questions asked by Jesus. Thirty-five times in total, Jesus levels a question at an individual or a group. And here, in today's gospel reading, we have the first of those thirty-five. Jesus turns to address the two individuals who have just stopped what they are doing and have started to walk towards Jesus – I imagine them striding to catch up as Jesus wanders on down the road. Jesus turns and says to the two: 'What are you looking for?'

Sometimes people speak of a sudden moment when they decide to follow God. That's the way that the calling of the first disciples is depicted in the other gospels. This passage in John's gospel is a little different. Andrew and a second unnamed disciple had, in John's account, already left home and family to become disciples of John the Baptist. But when Jesus passes they

experience what the biblical scholar Paula Gooder calls a ‘divine itch’.¹ Perhaps that same feeling that drew them away from all they knew to follow John the Baptist; perhaps an even greater sense of pull, a sense that in Jesus they have gazed upon someone who will scratch that itch that niggles at them for life with God.

The question of Jesus to those disciples – ‘what are you looking for?’ – recognises that itch. And perhaps John the gospel writer makes this Jesus’s first question because he recognises that uncovering our own deepest desires – the desires for which we were created – is fundamental to our human search for God. And John is at the same time clear that these disciples, like all humans, are not simply searching for some passive object. For it is a living human, indeed God incarnate, who holds the gaze of the disciples. Their epiphany is not the discovery of a thing but the beginnings of an entry into a relationship; the start of the unfolding of love, friendship; community. Not for nothing does Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, have those praying during his *Spiritual Exercises* begin their prayer by calling to mind ‘how it is that God our Lord is gazing at me’. Like the disciples and Jesus staring at one another, when we turn our gaze towards God we may well find God gazing back at us.²

In response to Jesus, the disciples ask their own question. And this question, too, opens up similar depths. The words appear straightforward enough: ‘where are you staying?’ Its immediate plain sense, of course, concerns where Jesus’s physical lodgings are to be found. But that Greek word *menein* – staying, abiding, resting, dwelling – keeps cropping up in John’s gospel. ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’ (John 6.56). ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples’ (John 8.31). ‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places’ (John 14.2). ‘Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit’ (John 15.5). ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love’ (John 15.9).³ So the

¹ Paula Gooder, *Let me go there*, (Canterbury Press, 2016), p.103

² Michael Buckley, *What do you seek?: The questions of Jesus as challenge and promise*, (Eerdmans, 2016), p.15.

³ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, (Baker Academic, 2021), pp.55-6

disciples' question – 'where are you staying?' – is, like Jesus's words to them, no mere request for information. It too is a question that enquires into the depth of who Jesus is. This same 'Word who became flesh and dwelt among us' is the one whose ultimate dwelling is with God in heaven. And, John indicates, the two disciples now step into that life. 'They came and saw where Jesus was staying (*mene*), and they remained (*emeinan*) with him that day.' The rest of John's gospel – and the rest of those disciples' lives – can be seen as a journey into learning what that staying; abiding; resting; dwelling looks like.⁴

It is possible for questions to remain at the shallow end of the pool. Just before Christmas I found myself flicking through the latest Waitrose Food magazine. On the back page was the regular celebrity interview slot, snappily titled 'My cup of tea'. Interviewee, the singer Heather Small. Question one: what's your signature dish? Answer: 'Personally, I don't cook.' You can imagine the interviewer taking a deep breath: it is going to be one of those days. Yet things recover until the final question, the question of all questions, the question from which the whole interview series has gained its title. 'How do you take your tea?' Answer: 'I only drink herbal tea.'⁵ In their mind, the interviewer draws up their resignation letter.

And yet by contrast the question posed today by Jesus is a challenge that cuts deep inside the disciples. His question is like a plough that works its way through the disciples soul, turning over their lives, and uncovering for them the ways in which God's Spirit is breathing inside them.⁶

Something like this seems to have been the formative experience of Dag Hammarskjöld, an early Secretary-General of the United Nations. Among the reflections found after his death in a plane crash during a mission to the Congo were these words: "I don't know Who – or what – put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment, I did answer Yes to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I

⁴ Ford, *Gospel of John*, p.56

⁵ Waitrose Food magazine, November 2022, p.126

⁶ Buckley, *What do you seek?*, p.12

was certain that existence is meaningful and therefore my life in self surrender had a goal. From that moment I have known what it means 'not to look back' and 'to take for the morrow'."⁷

On his way, God turns to you and holds your gaze: 'What are you looking for?' Do you answer, 'where do you abide?'

⁷ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W.H. Auden, (Faber & Faber, 1964), p.205, quoted in Michael Buckley, *What do you seek?*, (Eerdmans, 2016), p.13.