

John Docherty, January 15, 2017

Come and see

There are a couple of things that struck me as I was preparing this meditation, drawn largely from the passage in John's gospel.

The first was the somewhat cryptic nature of a link between an overarching theme as suggested by the Lectionary - "Come and see" - and Jesus' invitation to the disciples of John to "come and see" where he was lodging.

Jesus' invitation itself isn't all that unusual, but because it seems like such an innocuous thing to do, I wondered about the choice of "come and see" as a theme.

"Is there something in this idea that the Lectionary compilers expect me to uncover? Is there some subtle meaning that I'll have to ferret out of the text?"

On the face of it, there are a couple of obvious ways of reading this idea of "coming to see" :

- "come and see" in the sense of "come and look at" something; see it with your own eyes.
- or, "come and see" in the sense of "come and gain understanding" of something; gain insight that you didn't have before

So, I quite naturally started digging a little to find out whether there was something more interesting in this idea of "coming to see", particularly given that the context of the passage we read in John's gospel seems to be a fairly ordinary exchange.

I'll read the most directly relevant part of it again :

"The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 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?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day."

Again, it's a pretty straightforward exchange that on one level simply describes how some of Jesus' disciples were introduced to him.

Mind you, one might wonder what it was that they expected to see in asking Jesus where he was staying. Some commentators suggest they may have been a little shy, and were caught off-guard by Jesus' question. Others suggest they may have been hoping for more time for intimate discussion than would have been likely standing in the road.

For myself, I wonder if they were still sizing Jesus up on some level. They were John's disciples, after all, and were accustomed to being with a man who wore camel hair robes, and lived on locusts and honey.

Were they curious to see how much Jesus resembled John in this regard? We are told elsewhere that he had no fixed home, so were they relieved to see that he didn't live in a luxurious mansion of some kind?

At any rate, whatever they saw resulted in their staying with him, and recruiting other family members to join them.

But there *are* a couple of elements of this exchange that hint at the need for a more nuanced reading of John's gospel than might be necessary for a reading of the other gospels by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Some of you may know that John's gospel has traditionally been understood as being qualitatively different from the other three.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are referred to as the “Synoptic” gospels, because they share quite a bit in common with each other, and offer a synopsis, or overview, of Jesus' ministry from birth to death.

They share many of the same details, quote parables, follow much the same chronology with regard to the timing of events in Jesus' life, describe multiple miracles as evidence of Jesus' power, and, generally speaking, tend to focus almost exclusively on his ministry outside Jerusalem.

John, on the other hand, has Jesus travelling back and forth between Jerusalem and Galilee; has very few reports of miracles (and when he does, they tend to be less a demonstration of power so much as signs pointing to his identity as the Son of God); has no parables to speak of, in spite of language that uses lots of imagery and metaphor; and he has nothing to say about Jesus' birth and human genealogy.

Mark has nothing to say about the events around Jesus' birth either, but John doesn't even attempt to place Jesus in a human context.

He starts off his gospel with these words :

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

This is a very different take on the story of Jesus' life.

While the other evangelists go to some pains to ground the story of Jesus in the story of the people of Israel and the prophets, John jumps right in with a stunning declaration of Jesus' identity as the Son of God, the initiator of all things that have come into being.

Right from the start, John is inviting us to “come and see” something in Jesus that even his contemporaries had difficulty seeing.

In the passage that was read, for example, John the Baptist starts out by exclaiming “Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

This is a much more dramatic declaration of Jesus' identity on the part of John the Baptist than what we find in the other gospels.

In Matthew's gospel, for example, the Baptist sends word to Jesus from prison to ask for reassurance that Jesus is, in fact, the one they've been waiting for.

In John's gospel, there's no ambiguity :

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

John, the evangelist, is the only one who uses this title of “Lamb of God”.

It's an invitation to “come and see” what was hidden from the people of the day.

Throughout this gospel, John the evangelist invites us to “come and see” something about Jesus that is important for our understanding of him and his ministry.

In some ways, because his language is full of metaphor and imagery, this gospel can sometimes feel a little otherworldly. John is, after all, also the author of the Apocalypse, with all of its visions and metaphor, and something of that imaginative style is already present in this gospel.

The “I am” statements of Jesus, for example, are only found in John's gospel :

John 6: 35, 48 I am the bread of life
John 8: 12, 9:5 I am the light of the world
John 8: 58 Before Abraham was, I am
John 10:9 I am the door
John 10:11 I am the good shepherd
John 11:25 I am the resurrection and the life
John 14:6 I am the way, the truth, and the life
John 15:1 I am the true vine

Every one of those statements is an invitation to reflection; to meditation; an invitation to step back for a moment and consider who this man really is.

Every one of those statements could provide enough material for a separate sermon on the depth of its meaning, and the implications for our lives.

I am the bread of life : the source of strength, of inspiration, of life itself

I am the light of the world : the source of knowledge, of direction, of hope

Before Abraham was, I am : a reference to the name of God : Yahweh / I am that I am

I am the door : the means by which you can access what you need for this life

I am the good shepherd : the one who cares *about* and cares *for* you

I am the resurrection and the life : the promise of a full and eternal existence

I am the way, the truth, and the life : the model to follow; the example to trust; the assurance to embrace

I am the true vine : the one through whom you can draw strength and purpose.

But I've already said that each of these statements deserve a sermon of their own. I haven't even tried to scratch the surface of what we might be invited to come and see in these words. And what *I've* seen in those statements may not be what *you* see.

And those statements are only part of the portrait of Jesus that John is painting for us.

If we were to move through the gospel, chapter by chapter, we'd be introduced to a Jesus whose first miracle is to gently soften the embarrassment of a wedding couple when they run out of wine. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

We then immediately move to Jerusalem and find this same Jesus exploding in rage at the temple and overturning the tables of the money-changers. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

From there, we find Jesus in Samaria, where he accepts a drink of water from a Samaritan woman. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

From Samaria, Jesus then returns to Galilee, and once again comes to Jerusalem, where he heals on the Sabbath, in spite of the rabbinical laws forbidding this. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

Returning to Galilee, Jesus then feeds five thousand people (not counting women and children). What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

That same night, he joins his disciples in a boat by walking on the water to reach them. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

Some time later, Jesus is confronted with a woman who was caught in the act of adultery, and he refuses to condemn her. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

He then tells his disciples, "... you will know the truth and the truth will set you free ...". What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

In chapter 11, when Jesus stands before the tomb of his friend Lazarus, we're told he wept. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

What do you see in the fact that he dallied for two days before coming to see Lazarus when told he was ill?

After raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus allows his sister Mary to anoint his feet with costly perfume and wipe them with her hair, to the disgust of Judas, who felt the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

On the evening before his own death, Jesus washes his disciples feet. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

He then tells them "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

Following his last meal with his disciples, he is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, and when Peter cuts off the ear of one of the High Priest's servants, he tells Peter to put

his sword back in its sheath, asking “Am I not to drink the cup that the father has given me?” What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

When Jesus hung on the cross, we're told by Matthew and Mark that he cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

We're told by Luke that he also said, as he hung on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing.” What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

John gives us none of these details of the crucifixion, but he does tell us that Jesus looked down, and seeing his mother and his favourite disciple, says “Woman, here is your son”, and to the disciple “Here is your mother.” He then simply says, “It is finished”, and dies. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

And finally, all the gospels then describe Jesus' resurrection and final words to his disciples. What do you see in this aspect of Jesus?

Tell me, what do *you* see in this Jesus?