

Third Sunday of Epiphany Evening (20.01.19)

1 Samuel 3: 1 – 20; John 1: 29 – 42

Time plays tricks on the memory. I suspect we all know that, and some may well be able to think of anecdotes that attest to it. In 1936 an amateur anthropologist called Tom Harrison became frustrated with what the newspapers were claiming were popular views about the Abdication Crisis: they didn't seem to correspond to anything people he met were saying. So he set about creating the Mass Observation project. He asked people to record what was happening to them and what they were thinking about it. It was a "ramshackle, triumphantly unscientific organisation"¹ but out of it grew the highly scientific and professionalised discipline of opinion polls that we know today.

During the Second World War, Harrison encouraged people on the Home Front to keep diaries of their experiences. In 1975 he went back to some of the same people together with his editor, the historian Philip Ziegler, to ask them to give their version of what they remembered of what they *now* recalled of the incidents. Ziegler says "Any relationship between the incident they had described in their diary and the story they told in 1975 was almost entirely co-incidental. They got *everything wrong*: dates, places, the sequence of events." His conclusion was "The experiment convinced me that, though oral testimony might be of value in recapturing atmosphere, it was worthless or worse than worthless if hard facts were wanted."

I think this is a lesson we need to learn and keep at the forefront of our minds when we are reading stories about Jesus in the Gospels. The Gospels are written records of oral traditions about Jesus that circulated in the decades after his life, death and resurrection. On a

¹ Philip Ziegler in the foreword to "Mass-Observation: Britain in the Second World War" ed Sandra Koa Wing [2007] The Folio Society

conservative estimate, the earliest was written at least 30 years after the events it describes. Many scholars would put it much later than that. The last Gospel to be written – John’s Gospel from which we’ve read this evening - may have been written 70 or 80 years after the events. So if we’re looking for hard facts, we may well be on a hiding to nothing! It’s impossible to reconcile the story we’ve heard proclaimed this evening with the other Gospels’ accounts of the dove descending at Jesus’ Baptism, of how the first disciples were recruited and of when Jesus said Simon was to be called Peter. If someone were to take the Gospels and try to extract from them a chronology, or timeline, of the life of Jesus they would be doomed to failure. But, also, they’d be showing that they misunderstand what the Gospels are all about.

Nothing I have said undermines or invalidates the Gospels. Their purpose is not to give us facts: their purpose is to reveal the truth – *the* truth, with a capital T. And truth is far more important than fact. When

we read the Bible we should be asking not so much what precisely happened, and in what order did it happen, as what is being said to us by the story in the form in which we receive it.

This evening’s Gospel, the story in John chapter 1, is about recognition signs. It’s about what Jesus is recognised to be and what people do about it. Jesus is the one on whom the dove descended and remained. The dove represents the Holy Spirit. So Jesus is the one who has, and retains, and who operates through and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The origins of the phrase “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” are very complicated and contested, but it is clear that John recognised Jesus to be The One, the one who - precisely because he has, and retains, and operates through and in the power of the Holy Spirit – is able to transform the world in a way that no mere person ever could. And it is equally clear that when people see that they are drawn to him. They

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want to go and see what's going on and they want to re-orientate their lives to align them with him.

We believe that all baptised people have a vocation. Vocation is not a term reserved for people who exercise professionalised, accredited ministries within the church. We believe that Jesus has set aside a role for everybody who has been baptised. And therefore, exercising discipleship includes working out what that vocation is.

It may be that for some that means going on a deeply spiritual, inward journey contemplation. Although it's a rather quaint and amusing story, we can perhaps equate the Lord calling the boy Samuel with that sort of process: someone agonising in the small hours of the night over a sense of calling and having to go for spiritual direction to discern the voice of God. For others, though, it may be more prosaic.

And I think this account in John 1 describes the process. The two disciples saw the Christ-likeness of Jesus, they went to find out more and ended up joining in. And it may be for us, working through the implication of being a baptised follower of Jesus, it may be that it's not about wrestling with earnest and profound existential self-examination. It may be it's about liking the look of what we see; recognising that what we see has a Christ-like quality to it; and going and rolling our sleeves up to get stuck in ourselves. What we're looking at may be an activity in the Priory. Or it may be something else, beyond those doors, that has no particularly religious label attached to it.

Epiphanies occur, revelation is to be had, but we need both imagination and courage to recognise it – and, having recognised it, to respond to it as well.

Amen.

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