

## Recognising the Lord

A sermon preached by Licensed Lay Minister Tony Lemon at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 18 January 2015.

**Readings:** Samuel 3, 1-10; Revelation 5, 1-10; John 1, 43-51

**Key texts:**

- Samuel 3, v 7(part): 'Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord'
- Revelation: 5, parts of vv.5 and 6: 'See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, that he can open the scroll' .... 'Then I saw ... a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered'
- John 43, v.49 Nathaniel replied 'Rabbi, you are the son of God! You are the King of Israel.'

For most preachers I imagine that there are times when they look up the appointed readings for the service and wonder why they have been chosen, how if at all they are supposed to be linked together, and how on earth they are going to use them in writing a sermon. Often the main problem will be the Old Testament reading, especially if it happens to be one of those that portrays God in a way that we simply can't identify with. But there is also the problem of Revelation, the last book in the Bible and probably the most difficult to understand: full of strange, lurid and sometimes bizarre and violent imagery. The temptation is to ignore such readings and simply focus on the Gospel, but for once I decided that I really should try and come to grips with all three of today's reading and see whether I could find a common thread! And what I have to offer may be summed up in three words: 'recognising the Lord'.

This theme emerges very clearly from our Old Testament reading from Samuel, where Samuel is repeatedly called and naturally assumes that it is the aged Eli who needs him. He must have been puzzled when three times Eli says he has not called for him. But then Eli guesses that it is the Lord who is calling Samuel, but we are told 'Samuel did not know the Lord' and proceeds to explain to Samuel how to respond. We can only speculate about just what kind of knowledge is at issue here. It cannot be the personal knowledge of a Lord and Saviour that is portrayed in the Gospels, but it clearly implies an Old Testament equivalent – not just knowledge *about* God, but a relationship that enables recognition of the Lord's voice and response to it when he calls.

In our passage from Revelation, as we might expect, things are much less straightforward. The scroll that is mentioned here evidently contains God's plan to get creation back on track. In the opening chapters of Genesis the creation story portrays a God who commits himself to work within his creation through humankind. But it hasn't gone to plan – humans have failed. From within the traditions of Israel, Israel has been called to be God's true humanity, to put God's rescue plan into action, but this too has been a failure. In very simple terms, God had planned to run the world through humans, and when this failed to rescue the world through Israel, but both have let him down. In John's Revelation, God has a plan, but who can open the scroll that contains it? Just as all are despairing, one of the assembled elders cries 'Look! Here is the one who can do it.' The elder describes this one as the lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David – the lion who will attack the 'eagle' of the Roman empire – confirming scriptural prophecies of the Messiah, a Messiah whom the Jews expected to win the decisive battle against the last of their enemies and so liberate them, God's people, once and for all. What John *hears*, then, is the announcement of the lion; but what he *sees* is the lamb 'a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered'. One is the symbol of power, the other of gentle vulnerability, and,

through its sacrifice, the ultimate weakness of death. But the lion and the lamb are to be fused together. John now understands that the lion's victory is to be accomplished through the sacrifice of the lamb. The lamb stands for the true Messiah, who is truly human and truly Israelite, in accordance with God's purpose. So again we see the recognition of the Lord, in the face of the lamb, the Messiah, the one who can redeem God's purpose in the face of the failures of humankind and of Israel.

In our Gospel reading, no sooner has Jesus recruited Philip as one of his disciples than Philip finds Nathaniel and tells him about finding Jesus of Nazareth, who is the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote. So as soon as Philip becomes a disciple, he also becomes a missionary. By doing so he sets an example for all Christians: our faith is not something to hide but something to communicate to others, by whatever means seem appropriate in the secular, and some would say post-Christian, society in which we live.

But our short Gospel reading centres on Nathaniel rather than Philip, and it is Nathaniel's recognition of the Lord which provides the third illustration of our theme. Initially he is understandably sceptical of what Philip tells him, not least because of local rivalries which lead to his famously cynical question – 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip realises that argument isn't going to work – argument is frequently no substitute for experience – and simply says 'Come and see'. So Nathaniel comes, and is immediately surprised that Jesus could see into his heart: 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit'. How could Jesus possibly know that when they had only just met? Jesus reveals that he had seen Nathaniel under the fig-tree – a symbol of peace for the Jews – and evidently realised that he was meditating on the promises of God. As in this morning's psalm (139,v.1) 'you have discerned my thoughts from afar'. It was this – that Jesus could see into his inmost heart – that stirred Nathaniel into recognition: 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' These exclamations should probably be understood, in Nathaniel's mouth, as messianic titles – phrases that arise from his understanding of prophecy. They mean more to John, the author of the Gospel, but not yet to Nathaniel. His exclamations may be seen as outbursts of an exalted hope rather than a settled conviction. At this point he clearly lacks the experience and understanding which later led Simon Peter to make his confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi. But to recognise in Jesus the Messiah for whom Israel has been waiting within a few moments of meeting him is no small step.

In all three cases that we have read about this morning, the recognition of the Lord is only the beginning of understanding. Samuel has to be instructed by Eli to recognise that it is the Lord who is calling him: he has not known the Lord hitherto and is only starting on the road, but as he grows up the Lord is with him and he 'let none of his words fall to the ground'. The symbolic meanings of the book of Revelation are not easy to interpret, and even John himself acknowledges the need for an angelic mediator to explain the meaning of the mystery disclosed to him. And for Nathaniel, his dramatic recognition of Jesus is only the very beginning of discipleship, but an unusually firm foundation for the maturing of faith and understanding. Recognition of the Lord comes to us in many ways, some dramatic but many more measured. Either way, growth into faith is a slowly maturing process to which we need to be open and accepting. Somewhere, however dimly, we have recognised the Lord and so, in the words which the celebrant often uses as we approach the altar for the Eucharist, we come because we have a little faith and would have more.