

Enrichment in Life's Search

A sermon preached by *Dr Tony Lemon* at the 10.00am service at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 16th January 2011

Corinthians 1: 1, v. 5 For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind

John 1, part of v. 38 'What are you looking for?'

When we read the Gospels, there are many places where we are entitled to feel frustrated, because the narrative is so skeletal – places where so much is left to our imagination, so many questions left unanswered. Above all, of course, this is true of Jesus' childhood and formative years. But it is also true of John the Baptist, of whom we see so little – perhaps he himself would have approved of this, because everything that he is recorded as saying and doing shows how conscious he is of being merely the signpost to the Messiah. Nevertheless it is striking that within a very few verses of that glorious prologue to St. John's Gospel, we move through the briefest introduction of John to the first meeting of Jesus with two of the people who are going to be his disciples. This is one of those passages where we should like to know much more – a curiosity which is only partially quenched by the narratives of the other Gospel writers.

What we can see very clearly is John's humility. Those with him are described as his disciples, but he has no hesitation in pointing them to Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' – surely knowing as he does that this will lead them to leave him and follow Jesus. John shows no envy or resentment, only a clear sense of his destined purpose: as soon as Jesus came on the scene, John had no thought other than to send men to him. It is Andrew and another of John's disciples who first approach Jesus. We can imagine their awkwardness in doing so: the picture conjured up is of the two men shyly following behind Jesus, unsure of their next move, and of Jesus coming to their rescue by turning to speak to them. His question seems natural enough – 'What are you looking for?' – but what are they to say in reply? It is hardly the moment to launch into an explanation of what John has been preparing them for, and to ask whether Jesus is the one for whom they and all Israel have long been waiting. So they counter by recognising him as a teacher – calling him Rabbi – and asking 'where are you staying?'

Such a seemingly simple question from Jesus and an equally simple answer from them, but in each case imbued with far deeper meaning. Jesus' question did not suppose them to be in

search of a nearby house or some other object. It was in effect asking them what they sought *in their lives*: perhaps the most fundamental question that anyone can be asked. They probably appreciated this *double entendre*: but how to respond, then and there, to someone who was a total stranger to them? In asking where Jesus was staying, they were effectively saying that they did not wish to speak to Jesus just on the road, that they wanted to spend some time with him – to linger longer, and share with him their questions, their problems, their troubles. They wanted to meet Jesus as a friend in his own house. This Jesus clearly appreciates, and his answer – again so simply phrased – is ‘Come and see’. Before they do, Andrew first goes to find his brother, Simon Peter – and so Andrew becomes the first Christian missionary. His actions are mirrored in the passage which follows today’s Gospel when Philip goes to find Nathaniel: and when Nathaniel famously and cynically asks ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’, this time it is Philip who, unconsciously of course, echoes Jesus’ words and says ‘Come and see’.

‘What are you looking for? Is a question everyone needs to ask from time to time. What is my aim and my goal? What am I really trying to get out of life? Much of the context of our lives is of course effectively fixed and difficult or impossible to change – the more so, probably, as we get older. What God has given us, we must accept – with gratitude, but where necessary also with fortitude. But there is always scope for choice, perhaps in seemingly small things, but they may be much more important than we realise, having consequences for others and producing a whole chain of consequences far beyond our immediate awareness. For younger people, the choices may be bigger and more obvious, in terms of education, career, where they are going to live, when and whether they are going to start a family, and so on.

Most of us seek, in greater or lesser measure, some degree of *security*. A safe job, enough money to meet the needs of life and some left over to enjoy holidays and other pleasures, as well as to make reasonable provision for retirement. For parents who have known insecurity in their own lives, it is very natural to put a high priority on such security for their own children. For many people whose jobs are threatened by spending cuts at the present time the security that they had come to take for granted is threatened, and becomes their number one priority. All this is natural and right. But whenever I find myself thinking in such terms, I am also reminded of the words of the hymn ‘Father, hear the prayer we offer’. They have stuck in my mind ever since singing them at the wedding of student friends who were going out to do voluntary service overseas, in Malaysia, and for whom the words seemed so appropriate:

‘not for ease that prayer shall be; but for strength that we may ever / live our lives courageously’. There is always that balance to be struck, between security and risk: and as followers of Christ we are asked to be open to God’s will for us.

Many young people naturally seek what is generally called a *career* – not just a job, but something that will allow them to progress and achieve, something fit for the qualifications they have gained, for the talents and abilities they believe themselves to have. The more confident, those with self-belief, may look for power, prominence and prestige. Again such ambition is all very natural and reasonable at one level: human beings are variously talented and of course they should seek to use their gifts to the full: Jesus came, he told us, that we may live abundantly – to live life in all its fulness. But there are pitfalls. A century ago many people in humble families probably settled for too little, because they were offered little opportunity to use their abilities or to widen their horizons. Today it is often the reverse: a culture of celebrity raises unrealistic ambitions; the vast expansion of university education produces a culture of entitlement that in many cases cannot be realised; and increasing student debts understandably focus many student minds on careers which will both pay off those debts and provide the most rapid return on capital. Confidence, self-belief and a desire to use what God has given us are entirely good in themselves: but as Christians we need to be exercising these things not only for our own good, but in the service of others. When we see human ambition in its extreme forms we all know it is bad, whether it be the poor Tunisians who have had the courage to rise in rebellion against their the corruption and oppression of their dictatorial President and his extended family, or the current outcry in Britain against the astronomic bonuses of bankers who are seen to be living in a ‘parallel universe’.

These are the obvious examples, but more insidious is the whole culture of purely selfish ambition, which may determine how people do their jobs, what they prioritise, whom they seek to please, whom they ignore or to elbow out of the way: ultimately, whether they are prepared use their gifts in the service of others or purely to further their own ascent of whatever ‘greasy pole’ their own career structure offers. As a college tutor I am frequently struck by the contrasting career approaches of different students. Many look first to potential income and the lifestyle it will bring, some of them single-mindedly set on city careers from the word go. Many are unsure what they want they are looking for, often more so that when they came to university, as three or four years of higher education has broadened their horizons, enabling them to see the wide range of possibilities. Many of these – an encouraging number in my experience – do look beyond the obvious material rewards, in part

realising the downsides of the lifestyles they bring, but also with a genuine desire both to fulfil themselves and to contribute to society.

‘What are you looking for?’ Many people, consciously or unconsciously, are searching for some kind of peace – something to enable them to live at peace with themselves, at peace with God and at peace with their fellow human beings. That search, we must assume, led the disciples in our Gospel story people first to listen to John the Baptist and then, shyly but curiously, to follow Jesus whom John had called ‘the lamb of God’. It is a search in which, to use Paul’s words to the Corinthians, we may be ‘enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind’, a search in which we may be spiritually strengthened so that our gifts may be truly used: God’s promise is that if we give ourselves to him, he will make of each one of us what we have it in us to be. William Barclay tells the story of someone who came upon Michelangelo chipping away with his chisel at a huge, shapeless piece of rock, and asked the sculptor what he was doing. ‘I am releasing the angel imprisoned in the marble’, he replied. When Andrew introduced his brother Simon Peter to Jesus, he says ‘You are to be called Cephas’ – Peter, or the rock – because Jesus saw in Peter not only a Galilean fisherman but also someone who had it in him to become the rock on which his church would be built. Jesus is the one who sees what we are looking for, perhaps better than we ourselves, and who knows what we can become: like Michelangelo, he can release the angel in the marble. But for this to happen, we need now and again to pause and reflect on where we are going, to ask ourselves what we are looking for in our lives.