

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 2/Epiphany 2 Year B 2024

One of the tasks faithful Christians are faced with is to withstand and correct inaccurate ideas about God. One of our tasks in communicating the faith to people who either have no belief or a deficient belief, is to propose the truth of the Christian God. Because oftentimes the language we use around God, and all the associated ideas, is simply not understood. In other words, so much of the language of faith we are familiar with and take for granted is simply not heard. It is sort of like trying to order food at MacDonalds, but only having in your hand the menu from KFC! Our message cannot be heard because the language is not understood.

The less sensitive and hard-core atheists will laughingly dismiss faith in God as nothing more than superstitious belief in some 'Sky daddy' (their current, preferred derogatory term). Some will imagine the Christian God as some sort of Cosmic Policeman, sitting in the clouds with a big baton, waiting to bash us on the head if we step out of line. For others, God is a Cosmic 'force', directing the Universe to your personal good. Equally unhelpful is the image of God as some sort of divine Santa Claus. Someone who will give us good things if we are good. Worse, many folk imagine God in pagan terms in which the relationship between God and man is contractual. Do something for God then he will do something for us. And while these ideas about God we might find strange and even laughable, they are incredibly common.

Sometimes the best thing we can say to those who reject faith in God is to say, 'well, the kind of God you *think* we believe in, I don't actually believe in either'. Sincere Christians must be able to say, 'We don't believe in some sort of 'cosmic sky Daddy'. We don't believe in a god who just gives us good things if we are good. We don't believe in a god of exchange. We don't think faith is simply a matter of 'pay up and pray up' and all will be fine. In the end, we must be able to say that what is often a *caricature* of the Christian God is a pathetic substitute for the truth of the Christian faith.

At the heart of true, Christian faith is an encounter. And this encounter is with a person: Jesus Christ. Christianity is not an idea or concept. It is not even so much a way of life. Much less is it a code of conduct or a value system. Those who think they can argue their way to faith by reasoned argument are stumped on this point. It is certainly not the case that Christian faith is unreasonable, illogical, or anti-intellectual. On the contrary. But all those efforts will ring hollow without the encounter with Jesus Christ.

It is this great mystery we have celebrated over Christmastide. We have recalled once more the God who is *Emmanuel*, the God who is with us. We have told again the story of God who takes flesh among us, who shares our common human life. And precisely so that we might know him, *encounter him*. That is the mystery and wonder of Christmas. The mystery and wonder of *Easter* is that *we can meet and know him still*. Emmanuel manifest in Jesus is not simply a figure of the past. Not simply an interesting and inspiring historical person. Christian faith confesses that he is someone who is alive now. Someone who we can meet and know still, encounter still.

Yes, there are truth propositions that flow from this. There are truth claims Christianity cannot compromise on if it is to remain true. There are propositions we commend that remain at its very heart. The gospel placed before us today gives us one of them. John the Baptist exclaiming, *Behold the Lamb of God*. Here John proposes an objective truth about Jesus, one that has real consequence in how we understand him. In this case, Jesus embodies in his own self the ancient story of Exodus, and of delivery from captivity. In being declared the *Lamb of God*, John is indicating that Jesus is the paschal lamb sacrificed for the deliverance of God's people. John here is effectively saying that in Jesus is the hope and redemption of God's people. And this is one truth claim we make about Jesus. That he is the embodiment and fulfillment of Jewish hope and faith. And that his death has a saving, liberating effect.

This truth about Jesus, however, invites a response. What are we meant to *do* with this information? The gospel today provides us with the clue. And it highlights how the encounter with Jesus leads to the truth about him. And seeking the truth about him will lead us to a living encounter. Truth and Encounter, then, we might see as two sides of one coin. Not opposed to each other, but fulfilling each other.

A truth is proposed by John in the gospel today. And so too the nature of the living encounter with Jesus. In the gospel today this takes the shape of an invitation: *Come and see*. Jesus here does not offer argument or debate, but an invitation to share his life, an invitation to relationship with him. Now, this invitation comes after two followers of John the Baptist heard his exclamation, *Behold the Lamb of God*, and leave John to follow Jesus. When Jesus sees them, he asks them, *what are you looking for?* This is, of course, the eternal question, isn't it? *What are you looking for? What do you want out of life? What are you really looking for?* In the context of the gospel, behind the question is the implication: *You Jesus. We are looking for you.*

We are only in Chapter One of this gospel. A few chapters later in Chapter Four we will hear how Jesus is the Living Water, the One who satisfies every thirst. In other words, what we are looking for is answered in Jesus.

But it would be fair to say that Andrew (one of these disciples) and the other, aren't quite there. While they leave John to follow Jesus, they aren't quite at the place where they can assent to the Baptist's exclamation: *the Lamb of God*. Because when they meet Jesus - when they encounter him - they simply address him *Rabbi*, 'teacher'. Which is a wonderful lesson in how Jesus meets us where we are. The invitation is not conditional on a certain standard or level of belief. Jesus allows us to grow toward him. He will *lead us* to truth. We don't have to have it all sorted out at the start! And again, we have this reflected for us in the gospel today. Andrew goes on in the text today to call his brother Simon. When he does, he identifies Jesus no longer as *Rabbi* but *Messiah*. In turn, Jesus will call Simon, *Cephas*, the rock. When we grow in understanding the truth about Jesus, we grow in understanding the truth of ourselves.

In a curious way, to Jesus' question *what are you looking for*, the disciples ask, *where are you staying?* In asking to see the place where Jesus is staying, we are directed to the image of the home, the place of rest, the place of safety, and of belonging. It is not a coincidence that in the fourth gospel, the idea of the *abiding place*, the *dwelling place* resonates so loudly. *If you abide with me, I will abide you; In my Father's house there are many abiding places*. And is this not precisely how we will best encounter Jesus? By letting him into our dwelling place, our abiding place. That there becomes no separation between our private life and our faith life. Accepting Jesus' invitation means there is no distinction between what we do 'out there' and what we do 'in here'.

The great German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was quite right when he argued that the bedrock of Christian theology is prayer. For Bonhoeffer, all true theology begins in prayer and is centered on Jesus. In other words, it is not enough to have clever ideas about Jesus. We have to *know* him. Too much of contemporary so-called Christian theology is about having clever, sophisticated Christian ideas *about* Jesus but are not based on faith *in* Jesus, not based on the living encounter *with* Jesus. The Gospel today highlights that to meet Jesus is to know the truth about him. If we can be persuaded to *come and see* Jesus, all our petty and foolish objections against religion will vanish. We will be satisfied from *our own experience* that it is true. *Come and see*. In this way only will we ever be satisfied. Amen.