

Come and See

John 1:29-42

January 20, 2008

I.

Today's reading from John's Gospel is an extraordinary story about how ordinary men transformed their lives and became Jesus' disciples. It brings together two important themes where John the Baptist was a central character in both.

The first theme is the identity of Jesus. During the last few weeks we have heard about how Jesus was fully human and fully divine, and today John again confirmed Jesus' identity. Twice on two days he saw Jesus coming and declared, "here is the Lamb of God."

This brings us to the second theme, which is the meaning of discipleship. Andrew and another man, who traditionally has been thought to be John, the author of the Gospel, heard John the Baptist proclaim who Jesus was. That, in turn, led them to start following Jesus with the result that they became disciples and then brought others to do the same.

So we see that John the Baptist told who Jesus was and what Jesus meant to him, and then through his witness others were raised up to be disciples. And isn't that the pattern for Christianity over the centuries, and the pattern for our own Christian responsibility? Not only are we called to follow Jesus ourselves, but we also are called to proclaim to others, as John the Baptist did, who Jesus is to us so that others also might follow.

A story makes this point. It's about a Christian man who took a job in an oil field that was regarded as a pretty rough place. There was not much religion there. Most of the workers never had seen the inside of a church, and on Sunday morning they usually were sleeping off their hangovers.

One day this fellow told a friend about his new job, and his friend, who knew about the oil fields, expressed some concern. The friend said "you're going to be in for a hard time if those people ever find out you're a Christian. "I know, I know," said the man, "but it can't be helped. I need the job."

Several months later the two men happened to meet again. The friend asked the fellow, "Well, how's it going, have those roughnecks given you any problems because you're a Christian?" "Oh no," said the man, "No problems at all, they never found out."

What's wrong with that picture? Well, some people instinctively might say that nothing's wrong with it. They might say the fellow was smart not to bring up something that could make his life more difficult. Others, however, might reflect and say that having faith and being a disciple is not something that can be turned off and on like a light switch.

Whether or not we agree with how that story turned out, most of us are not in similar situations. Most of us live and work and socialize in more favorable settings. We can talk about what we believe. People are generally friendly and polite, and usually listen to what we have to say.

II.

Now that you probably can see where I'm going with this sermon, let's look at what happened in today's Gospel.

John the Baptist described Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He saw the Holy Spirit descending upon him and proclaimed that he was the Son of God.

Well, that got Andrew's and John's attention. As Jesus walked by they started to follow, and Jesus turned and asked "What are you looking for?" That was not a casual question. It was exactly the right question. Aren't all of us, at our deepest levels of hope, looking for something?

Andrew and John did not respond directly, but rather with a question of their own. They asked where Jesus was staying. And that was not just an idle inquiry about Jesus' address. They were seeking an invitation to spend more time with Jesus, and he told them to "come and see." Remember those words, "come and see." We will hear them again.

And they did what Jesus said. They went and saw. They stayed with Jesus for the evening, and it must have been quite an evening because the next day Andrew went to his brother, who later became known as Peter, and told him they had found the Messiah.

Well, we don't know what they talked about during that time. There were no newspapers or TV stations, and so no one leaked an inside story that could have been reported.

But we know from the Biblical timeline that Jesus had just begun his earthly ministry that led to the cross. And we also know that the events of today's Gospel happened right after Jesus had returned from forty days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. So we can imagine that Jesus knew his purpose on earth; that he told them about his messianic mission; and that asked them to be part of it.

That happens today when companies recruit employees. They talk about their vision, purpose, and plans for the future. Why wouldn't have Jesus done the same as he was recruiting disciples?

We know that Andrew and John, and then Peter, accepted the call. And if we read further in John's Gospel, as well as similar stories in the other three Gospels, we would have the complete picture of the disciples' calling. We would know how all of the men who eventually became apostles and built the church were called from the shores and hills of Galilee to follow Jesus in the greatest story, the greatest adventure, there ever was.

III.

That adventure continues today. And when we consider the significance of the salvation that God through Christ offers in the next world, and when we think about the blessings that our Christian lives offer in this world, we almost wonder why discipleship shouldn't be a no-brainer. Why isn't the world beating our doors down to get in and become Christians?

I think the answer has two parts. First, there are people out there who consider themselves good Christians, but who regard the church as being part of "organized religion" in a negative sense. They have watched us, and by "us" I don't mean St. Thomas but rather the larger church, and in several ways we have not presented ourselves well. When we think about some the public images of the larger church as being contentious, deviant, intolerant, and greedy, it's not hard to see why some faithful people would not want to be part of that kind of church.

The second part of the answer strikes a little closer to home, and the responsibility can be laid at the doorsteps of some very good and well-meaning churches.

People are not beating down the doors because they just don't know who we are. Some people might assume that today everyone knows about Christianity. They might assume that it's been around so long and people can find out whatever they want from books, TV, and the internet that no one lacks for information. Because instant knowledge is available perhaps it's easy to assume that everyone has all the facts and can make their own choices.

But that isn't true. Many people don't have the facts, or what they think are the facts are not. Their understandings can be incomplete, misleading, or wrong.

This “instant” aspect of our society reminds me of a story about Yakov Smirnoff, a Russian comedian who came to America and did some funny routines during the 1980s and 90s. One of them was called “What a Country!,” in which he marveled about American consumer products that did not exist in Russia at the time.

I remember on one of his shows he said “On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk. You just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice. You just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, what a country!”

Wouldn’t it be great if having a family was that easy? Maybe not. More to the point, wouldn’t it be great if we could just add water and instantly create church members? But even though we know bringing people into the church is more difficult than that, I would like to suggest that it isn’t so hard.

Today’s Gospel tells us that we don’t need clever arguments or broad theological knowledge. We don’t have to have all the answers to all of the questions that might come up. All Jesus said was “come and see.” He knew that experiencing faith is better than merely having it explained.

That applies to us. We don’t have to bear the entire burden of discipleship ourselves. The church is there to help us. And here I mean the church in the good sense, the church that consists of the overwhelming number of good and faithful Christians who are not part of the sensational stories that seem to grab the headlines.

Bringing people into the church is something that we do through the church. We invite people to come and see. We invite them to experience all we have here at St. Thomas. Certainly, it might help to explain what the church means to us, but that’s only the beginning.

Jesus asked Andrew and John what they were looking for, and he told them to come and see. People around us also are looking for something. They’re looking for the truth about what God through Christ can mean in their lives. They’re looking for the love and fellowship that Scripture promises. So, tell them to come and see. It’s not that hard. And you won’t be sorry.

V.

But even though it might not be hard, it also does not come naturally. We have to think about it and be intentional. At times God asks us to do things we would not do on our own if left to our own devices. He tells us that through faith we are to put things at the top of our lists that, in the absence of faith, could be toward the bottom.

This means that we must be more than just involved in discipleship. We also must be committed to it. And what is the difference here between involvement and commitment? Well, yesterday morning, at our mens’ breakfast, we enjoyed some tasty eggs and sausage. Eggs and sausage describe the difference. The chicken was involved, but the pig was committed. The chicken could walk away, but the pig gave it all up.

We are called to be committed, and we cannot just be involved for a while and then walk away. Many of you probably have seen the TV commercial that tells us how easy it is to ask about their product. They say it’s so easy a caveman could do it.

Well, without getting into the capabilities of cavemen, we probably can agree that worldly things can hold us back from talking to others about spiritual things. And we probably could agree that there are things we might rather do than tell people about St. Thomas and try to get them involved. But it also is not rocket science. It isn’t that hard. Just ask them to come and see. The church and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. Come and see. *Amen.*