

January 20, 2008

In our short reading from John's gospel we heard a few of the multitude of titles which the evangelist applies to Jesus in the introductory chapter of his gospel. This morning the Baptist declared that Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"; he is the "one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit"; he is the "Son of God". Before and after this particular passage we also learn that Jesus is the "Word", the Light, the one who makes the Father known, Rabbi (Teacher), the one "about whom Moses ... and the prophets wrote, the King of Israel and, in a final image, he is the "house of God" and "the gate of heaven".¹ In the space of one chapter 9 or 10 different ways of saying who Jesus is cascade forth as the evangelist does all he can to communicate to his readers whose story it is they will be following as the gospel unfolds.

For us who read these verses 2000 years of Christian history later, there is familiarity and, we are inclined to think, an understanding of what all these titles mean. But perhaps we are too familiar with what is said of Jesus here. "Lamb of God", "Son of God", "King of Israel", "the Word" – such ways of speaking about Jesus easily become religious formulae with

which we are so familiar that we quickly presume to know what they designate, and assume that the religious deed has been done when we utter them.

And yet, the very fact that within so few verses we get so many titles should suggest to us that such presumed understanding is indeed presumptuous. By sitting so many ways of identifying Jesus next to each other the gospel-writer is effectively saying that this one cannot be comprehensively understood. Jesus "is" the "Word of God", and yet this doesn't cover it. He "is" the "Son of God", and yet this is too narrow. He "is" the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world", but at the same time he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and so on. The great temptation is to take all such ways of talking about Jesus and to list them as a set of qualifications, like the many titles which such a figure as the Queen of England has a right to claim: Head of the Commonwealth, Supreme Governor of the Church of England, Duke of Normandy, Lord of Mann, and Paramount Chief of Fiji, and so on.

But there is an important sense in which none of the titles which are applied to Jesus really means anything in itself, by virtue of the very fact that so many are used. To

¹ Not explicitly – John 1.51 is an allusion to Genesis 12.10-17 (Jacob's vision of the ladder).

say that Jesus is the Word of God is to say that he is the Son of God, which is to say that he is the King of Israel, which is to say that he is the gateway to heaven, which is to say that he baptizes with the Holy Spirit, which is to say that he is the Light of the world. All of these ways of identifying Jesus, even though they come from quite different parts of the world in which he lived, point towards each other, and each changes the other.

And so, to fill out a bit more those equivalences I've just listed, to say that Jesus is the Son doesn't mean anything, if it doesn't also communicate to us that he sends the Spirit to us, which also doesn't mean anything if it doesn't also communicate that the gift of the Spirit takes away the sin of the world, which doesn't mean anything if it doesn't also communicate that the removal of sin makes known the Father to us. Merely getting the complicated religious language right is no entry into the reality of Jesus Christ and the God whose life and love he communicates. In this we can take our lead from today's psalm – which we'll hear in a little while: "In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure... Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required...". The psalmist points beyond getting the religion right to knowing God in his simplicity, and from that place being able to re-enter the religious rites and confessions with the appropriate spirit and understanding.

Jesus is not what we label him to be; he borrows, as it were, from our titles and praises, and makes them something else. As we speak of God, we foist upon him our own needs and desires and longings. We name him as we long for him to be – these are the titles we give him. The important thing is to wait and see what he will wear of what we offer in this way.

And this waiting brings us to the other important dimension of our gospel reading this morning, which is the response of those who hear the Baptist speak of Jesus in this way – opening ourselves up to hearing what Jesus will do with our things.

On hearing his declarations about Jesus, two of John's disciples approach Jesus and ask the rather odd question, "Where are you staying?" Now, "staying" is an important word in the Greek text here, for it is the word the Baptist used to speak of the Spirit descending and "staying" or remaining on Jesus, and it is the word which is also used for what the disciples do next – they "remain" with Jesus: "they came and saw where he was *staying*, and they *remained* with him that day". Their question is, effectively, "Where among the things of this world can we find you?", and the answer is "Come and see".

"Come and see", Jesus invites. And a few verses later the disciples will

themselves begin to issue the same invitation to other potential followers – Philip to Nathanael, “Come and see” (1.46), and later again, a Samaritan woman will invite her friends in the same way (4.29). The way into God’s life in Christ is not a matter of getting the religion right, for the religious words and deeds are there merely to catch our attention, distracting us from our current focus and drawing us to what really matters. God is not contained in these religious words; this would be magic and superstition. But the Word uses our words to signify what really matters, where our attention should be focused. “Come and see” invites us to be diverted, and to begin to learn to see things differently.

The gospel writer heaps up title upon title to give a kind of outline to Jesus, but it *is* only an outline. To fill it out we must “Come and see”, and travel with the one we see. As John’s gospel unfolds it moves from the opening declaration that Jesus is the one who makes the Father known (1.18) to the post-resurrection declaration that as Jesus knows God, so now might we: the Father of the Son is our Father, and his God is our God (20.17). Christian discipleship is the traveling of the journey from distraction by the one who makes God known, to actually coming to know God. It is the learning of a language, and the discovery of a new grammar for our language – a new way of joining up what we

have known and experienced.

“Come and see”, Jesus invites us still today. Come and see whether perhaps God is more than imagined. Come and see whether perhaps you are more, or less, than you’ve imagined. Come and see how the story of Jesus fills out and qualifies and perhaps even contradicts what we think our religious language about him means, and so see how new possibilities for faith and life are opened up by the work he does on our things.

Come and see how Jesus can be Lord, or King, or Word, or Enlivener, or Liberator, or Hope, or the Dream.

Come and see, for it is God’s good gift to reveal himself to all who come, seeking...