

Sermon for Sunday 20 August 2023

We continue our sermon series based on the book by John Pritchard: *Twenty Questions Jesus Asked... and how they speak to us today*. And today, the question Jesus asks is: 'What are you looking for?'

At the time of Jesus, it was said that there were more than 200 fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. That's a lot, and although it was possible to make a decent living, some boats were bigger than others and some nets would drag more fish than others. Making a decent living was not easy, and it was vital of course, not only for feeding your family, but also for paying tax to the Romans.



The Jewish people of first century Palestine lived in a time of oppression, and all of them grew up praying for the coming of the Messiah, the powerful one who would bring freedom from the oppressor. They did not know what he would look like, but they certainly knew what they were looking for: a deliverer. No wonder then that they were on the lookout for individuals out of the ordinary.

There was one man who certainly was out of the ordinary, and that was John, the one they called the Baptizer. And if you had lived in Bethsaida, close to Andrew and Simon, often coming across James, John and their father Zebedee from Capernaum, you would also have found him quite strange.



A prophet, baptizing lots of people in the Jordan, a complete one off, he proclaimed: 'Repent, turn away from all the rubbish you're doing, right now, and get ready, because God himself is coming!' John also spoke a lot about his cousin, Jesus, who would baptize not with water, but the Holy Spirit. Everyone was intrigued.

And one day, there he was, the famous cousin, and John the Baptizer cries out: 'See, here is the Lamb of God'!

But what was so special about him? He was certainly not rich or powerful, that's for sure. Nor was he armed or carrying anything ostentatious. But Andrew, Simon's brother, makes us understand that he had a *presence* that stopped you in your tracks and compelled you to listen.



When Andrew meets Jesus for the first time, Jesus greets him with a question: 'What are you looking for?'

What would you respond to that?

That really depends on your personality, doesn't it! Maybe the boldest among us would say 'Your cousin John is raving about you, we want to know what's so special about you!'. The shyest among us would not dare say anything probably. Others might be curious and say: 'We want a good story to tell when we get home tonight!'



But it seems that Jesus' question was much bigger than that. What was Andrew looking for? What was going to satisfy his dreams? All he can answer is: 'Where are you staying?' After all, to be honest, he just wanted to find out more about him. 'Why not come and see', said Jesus. And there they were, Andrew and his friends, spending most of the day with Jesus.

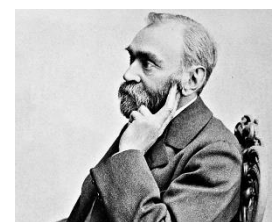
We know from the rest of the Gospels that Jesus spoke with authority, and yet with humility. And he spoke about God like he knew him personally. He talked about the people in the villages around the Sea of Galilee as if he'd known them all his life. That must have been astonishing.

No wonder Andrew was bursting to tell Simon about this man. Simon, a zealot, a born leader, a pragmatic man might have had other matters in mind. But when his brother told him 'We have met the Messiah'... He had to meet Jesus. And Jesus knew. He simply knew this was a leader of men, and he called him Cephas. Like he was a stone or a rock. Someone solid you could count on.

That tells us a little about what *Jesus* was looking for. He needed to create a team for the daunting task he had ahead, and in John chapter 1, we see the members being gathered. Andrew brought a friend, possibly John, and of course Simon-Peter, and also John's brother James, and Philip and Nathanael... Were these men choosing Jesus, or was Jesus choosing them? Both, of course, much as Jesus calls us and we respond to his call. And notice how Jesus is creating space for the disciples to respond: 'Come and see' he tells them. At the end of the day, when Andrew and Simon went back to Bethsaida, they probably had more questions than answers. And for sure, the main question was: 'What are you looking for?'

It's been said that the two most important days of our lives are the day we are born and the day we find out why. That's what we've actually been looking for.

Or is it? What is the purpose of our lives that makes them meaningful? In his book, John Pritchard tells us that Alfred Nobel became rich as a consequence of inventing dynamite. But in 1888, his brother died, and there was a mix-up: a French newspaper mistook the brother for Alfred who then read his own obituary! And in this obituary, the paper called Alfred a 'merchant of death'. What a shock! Was that his purpose in life? Perhaps it was this experience which led him to stipulate in his will that his fortune was to be used for what we know now as the Nobel prizes, awarded to those who have done their best for humanity in the fields of peace, medicine, science, literature and many others.



What are you looking for?

The disciples found the purpose of their lives in following Jesus, even to his death and theirs. As Christians, we have found something similar, albeit less dramatic. But the confusing thing is that in our Western world, we tend to think that we need more. Why do we think there's

something missing? Have we not found our very own identity in following Jesus, much like Simon who receives a new name when he meets the Messiah?

I think that as Christians, we have found in Christ what we have been looking for, and that's our *general* purpose. But as John Pritchard explains it, we still need to discern what our *particular* purpose is. And that in itself is a whole journey of discernment. That's why we need time to listen in prayer, nor presuming to know the answer too soon; we need friends as sounding boards for our thoughts;

we need the Word of God to see if there is something in the Bible that speaks particularly to us; we need space to read the signs of the times in the practical circumstances of our lives; and we need honesty to recognise what God calls us to do.

Your particular purpose might be to start a great charity, or more likely to support one with time and money. It might be to be a human rights lawyer, or more likely to pray for people who need a lawyer. It might be to cross the Channel and cook for starving refugees, or more likely to offer your gifts of friendship and cooking locally, in a ministry of hospitality.

Christian vocation is rarely found in major changes and grand gestures, but much more often in daily faithfulness. It is in the very small particulars that we work out our God-given purpose. And when grace finds us, we need to stop, listen, and take good notes. That is what we are here for.

May God continue to challenge us all and ask us: 'What are you looking for?'

