

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – Second Sunday of Epiphany – 15th January 2023

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Our gospel reading this morning describes two events – firstly the testimony of John the Baptist that Jesus was the Chosen One of God, and secondly, the selection of the first disciples. So in a few succinct sentences we hear the main facts without any elaboration.

Unlike the other gospel writers, John the gospel writer doesn't actually describe the baptism of Christ. If you want to hear more about that you'll need to read chapter 4 of Matthew's gospel. But John seems to assume that we already know the details of the baptism and a lot of other information besides. Which is quite natural as the early Christians for whom he was writing would have a good background knowledge. For John it's more important to establish that Jesus really is the Messiah.

John the gospel writer describes John the Baptist as very clear that he himself isn't the Messiah, he's just a human signpost. That's a very humble statement if you think about it. He's not anything special, he's saying, he's just there to prepare the way and get things ready for the superstar to follow. He's happy to point Jesus out to others, even his own followers at the risk of losing them. It's an interesting experience being a human signpost – I used to be one when we opened our garden in England for the Yellow Book charity. On our open weekend, once the tea and cake team was installed in the kitchen, the plant sellers were set up in the yard, and the ticket sellers and dog were sorted out at the front gate, I would be in the garden directing people to the various areas they were looking for. I was no longer a person, merely a guide, literally pointing the way.

John admits that he didn't recognise Jesus as the Messiah, understandably perhaps as they were related and most people would never expect their younger cousin to be the Son of God. He either hadn't been told by his elderly parents Elizabeth and

Zechariah about the visit of Mary to Elizabeth when Elizabeth was six months into her long prayed for pregnancy, and her recognition of the holy child Mary was carrying, as described in Luke's Gospel, or he's not really understood it properly. But he knows once Jesus has come to him for baptism, and John himself sees the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him.

Now he understands, now he knows that all his preaching about the Messiah, all the prompting by God to do what he has made his life's mission, isn't just crying into the wind. The Messiah he has been telling everyone about is real and right there in front of him. That must have been exhilarating for John – and perhaps reassuring that he hasn't dedicated his life to no purpose. John is rewarded for his faith by actually seeing the Holy Spirit coming down and resting on Jesus. Which is an interesting detail, for in the Old Testament, kings and prophets were anointed with the Holy Spirit but only temporarily. With the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus, it meant that his anointing was permanent. He was the long awaited Chosen One of God, or the Lamb of God, and in many pictures of the Baptist you'll see a sheep or lamb next to him. This isn't because he's a shepherd, it's him pointing ahead to how things are going to end, with Jesus sacrificed like a lamb on the same day that the Passover lambs were being killed in the temple. Jesus was to be the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world.

But the eager people coming to John for Baptism wouldn't have understood that depth of his prophecy, they would think it meant that Jesus was the Messiah come to free Israel from the Romans.

Once our Gospel writer has established exactly who Jesus is, he then describes the coming together of Jesus and his disciples. The first two heard the Baptist point out Jesus as the Messiah and left him to follow Jesus. One is named as Andrew who, full of excitement, fetches his brother Simon Peter to see the Messiah. There's no hesitation in either man, they leave everything and go. It's a mark of how much they and others were desperate to meet the long awaited Messiah. When Andrew and Simon arrive, Jesus sizes up Simon and promptly renames him Cephas or Peter, meaning rock.

Rocks come in many sizes, shapes and colours, some wear better than others. And so it is to prove with Peter, this rough-hewn fisherman, the man who will go on to make so many mistakes in his eagerness, display endearing enthusiasm and a huge

heart, let down his Lord when it mattered, and be an enduring sign for generations to follow that Jesus loves us in our different guises, despite our mistakes and cowardice. Peter becomes the very rock on which the church of Christ was built, with an enormous vote of confidence from the Holy Spirit.

So much for Peter and his brother Andrew, we know quite a lot about them from the various gospels. But what about the other disciple who was with Andrew – who was he? No-one knows for certain because nothing much has been written about him. It's thought that it could well have been one of the sons of Zebedee, called John, who was very young at the time all this was happening. This teenager witnessed the short ministry of Christ first hand, heard him speaking, saw the miracles he performed and had such clear memories that his Gospel, the Gospel of John, has endured down the centuries.

So we know that many people were searching for the Messiah when he was finally announced by John the Baptist. A bit like the game of hide and seek that children play, those searching had found lots of dead ends, empty hiding places and disappointments. It's much easier to find a person who wants to be found. And finally, the day had arrived when the Chosen One of God was wanting to be found. Once he was ready to start his ministry, he came to find his early disciples, even give them new names and change the course of their lives for-ever.

Nothing has changed for Christ since then. He is still coming forward to meet and welcome new disciples. It's a two way process though, we have to take time to look for him even in the most unexpected places. We may think that he won't want us, that we're not good enough, or clever enough, or devout enough. But He knows that we, like stones, come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes. Some might be like Peter, big and strong enough to be shaped into the cornerstone of the church building, others might be small stones that bind together to support others, some might be easily carved into beautiful shapes, others might be in the middle of the wall unseen but still doing their job. All are vital in keeping the wall together and upright, supporting the roof, giving shelter and reflecting beauty. We all have our part to play in Christ's Kingdom – some may be Archbishops preaching to millions, but many of us might be cleaning the church floor, others running a soup kitchen, helping neighbours, keeping an eye on elderly relatives, giving harassed parents a break, working long hours to heal the sick, just being there for the bereaved, giving

generously of time and money to help others, making beautiful music, even just a smile and a hello to the lonely.

So let's not worry about what sort of stone we are, let's just look for Christ the Master Builder, and let him decide where we should be and what to do with us.

Amen.