

What are you looking for?

Right back in the first book in the Bible, Genesis, in the story set in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are hiding from God after having eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree. We're told that God comes looking for them in the still of the evening and calls out, 'where are you?' And at one level there is nothing particularly significant or profound about that – God is simply trying to find Adam and Eve. But that call, that question, 'where are you?' can be read more deeply, as asking a more penetrating question to two people who have just sinned and who are hiding from God: 'where are you?' In other words, where is your life at the moment? Where are you, not outwardly in the garden, but where are you inwardly in your soul? This is what is called an existential question – a radical question concerning the mystery of human existence, a question that touches upon the very meaning of life.

Last Sunday we thought about a similar existential question, one raised by the story of Jesus' baptism when he was described as God's beloved Son. The question there was about identity: 'who are you?' Well, this morning our passage from John's Gospel presents us with another existential question which addresses us in the very depths of our beings. This time it's 'what are you looking for?' The passage describes how John has been baptizing out in the wilderness when he sees Jesus coming towards him and he declares that this is the one who he has been heralding and preparing the way for, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And when two of John's disciples follow Jesus he turns to them and says, 'what are you looking for?' And again, at one level it's a straightforward question: 'if you're following me you must be after something: what are you looking for?' But at another level it's a far deeper question about life and about human existence: 'what are you looking for?' In a sense this is shorthand for 'what is your life all about?'

So, 'where are you?' 'Who are you?' 'What are you looking for?' These are the deep, probing questions that the Bible throws at us and forces us to confront. Suddenly our lives are subjected to scrutiny and we are searched and called to account – by questions we might perhaps prefer to avoid. And so to the question from today's passage, 'what are you looking for?', and wouldn't it be interesting to hear our answers to that question, those of us

gathered here this morning? What are you looking for here in this place? And you might say that you have come here looking for inspiration for living, something to motivate you and to uplift you and to keep you going. And maybe you hope to find that in music or in worship or from the Bible and what gets said from the pulpit. Or maybe you're looking for company or, better still, community, because life in a big modern city can leave you feeling very isolated. But that leads to deeper questions, not just about what you are looking for here in this church but what you are looking for in your life. Maybe you're looking for love. Or maybe you're looking for healing. Or maybe you're looking for a job. Or maybe you're looking for peace, or for forgiveness, or for God, or for the meaning of life. And citizens of our our crazy 21st century world might say that they are looking for wealth, or for an antidote to ageing or for 15 minutes of fame. All these – all are answers to that question, 'what are you looking for?' Indeed we might wonder how these two disciples in our passage, Andrew and the other one, might have answered this question. What are they looking for? Liberation for their occupied country? An easing of the burden of their taxes? The Messiah?

Well, unfortunately we don't know what these two disciples might have said because they didn't answer Jesus' question. They didn't tell him what they were looking for. Instead they ask another question – and it's a strange one. To the question, 'what are you looking for?' they say, 'where are you staying?' - and what kind of answer is that: 'where are you staying'? Are they looking for an address? Are they looking for a postcode for their GPS device? Why do they want to know where Jesus lives? Well, surely this is because they realise that whatever else they may be searching after, whatever other yearnings may lie deep in their hearts, this figure before them, this Lamb of God that John has directed them to – he is what they are looking for. They are looking to stay with him, to live with him, to dwell with him. In fact this introduces us to a key term in John's Gospel a key idea. It surfaces later in the Gospel when the Christian life is pictured as 'abiding in Christ' so that we are like branches attached to a vine, rooted and grounded in the vine, drawing its very life from it. The branch lives in the vine and the vine lives in the branch and in this mutual indwelling there is life. So with these disciples. What they are looking for, their deepest search, is to stay with Jesus, to abide and live with him. As the great 4th century theologian, Augustine, famously put it, 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you': that fits with what these disciples in or

passage are alluding to. ‘Where are you staying?’ In other words where might we find rest for our souls? Where might we find a home for our hearts where we can be most fully ourselves?

To digress for a moment, I wonder if you happen to know what the Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year for 2016 is? Evidently this dictionary keeps track of words that see a big increase in usage each year and in 2016 it was the word ‘post-truth’. And what is post-truth all about? Well of course 2016 witnessed two big events, the Brexit referendum over Britain’s membership of the European community and the American election. And the idea of post-truth, while it’s been around for a while, came to the fore in both these campaigns. ‘Post-truth’ refers to the idea that objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal opinion. So you can say that leaving the European Union will release £50,000,000 for the British National Health service, or you can claim that Barak Obama is a Muslim who wasn’t born in America, and that 9/11 was a CIA conspiracy, and what these ‘truths’ do is to play to people’s emotional prejudices and their frustrations even though they are lies. And that’s how you win elections.

Well, this raises all kinds of issues about truth and the nature of truth and where truth lies. And that is a subject that is dear to the heart of John’s Gospel. Near the beginning, in the marvellous prologue to the Gospel, John speaks of Jesus as the eternal Word become flesh, ‘full of grace and truth’. And later in the Gospel Jesus will say of himself, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’. And near the end, at Jesus trial, the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate will ask the question, ‘what is truth?’ And when these disciples reply to the question, ‘what are you looking for?’ with the question ‘where are you staying?’ they are indicating that truth is not just about facts – verifiable facts that can be tested and proved. That’s an Enlightenment view of truth that is espoused by people like Richard Dawkins, but it is a diminished account of truth. But nor is truth just about emotions and feelings and what suits your particular persuasions and prejudices. In John’s Gospel truth is found in a relationship with Christ, in staying with Jesus. And that means that truth is something that needs to be lived with. It doesn’t disclose itself in simple facts and propositions. It doesn’t always fit in with our preferences or pander to our wishes. Truth is a matter of discovery that comes from being with Jesus, staying with him, dwelling in him.

That brings us to Jesus's response to these disciples. 'Where are you staying?', they ask, and there's something so wonderfully understated and low-key about Jesus' reply. It comes as an invitation: 'come and see'. Later in the Gospel Jesus will make great claims for himself: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', but he doesn't lay any of that on the disciples now – in fact he doesn't make any claims for himself at all. And he doesn't threaten them or cajole them. He doesn't say follow me or you'll go to hell. He doesn't say follow me because I'm right and everyone else is wrong. He doesn't challenge them to ask him into their lives. He simply says 'come and see'. Come to me and see what you find, see what you discover. Come and check it out! This is no barn-storming preacher jostling for recruits. And nor is this some political campaigner wielding promises. Jesus doesn't even offer anything. This is the one who is the key to what we are searching for inviting us to come and see. And that's the life of discipleship, the life of the believer. It's not about having all the answers. It's not about having the truth sewn up and God pinned down. It's about living with Jesus, and discovering what we see.

One last point. That invitation, 'come and see' implies that the truth, the truth of what we are looking for deep down, must become visible. People have to be able to see it to recognise it. And that is the task entrusted to the church. It's the burden of the Bible that the truth of God becomes visible in a community of people who live with Jesus. So at the end of the day the truth is not simply spoken or declared or argued over – it is demonstrated in the life of a people who live it. And what a challenge that is for the church. What do people see here? When they look at us on a Sunday morning do they see a welcoming community where indeed no-one is a stranger, and where gifts of word and song and musicianship are crafted to glorify God? Do they see people caring for one another – and having fun together? And do they see a community reaching out to the homeless? Do they see a community welcoming refugees by helping to organise football matches with them? Do they see people giving generously and refusing to be ruled by mammon? Do they see a community with an international vision supporting vital projects overseas? Well, I do not want to be complacent or to blow our own trumpet but I thank God that those are all things that can be seen here. And let that be an encouragement to consider what you might do to make the truth of Jesus Christ visible in this place – that people might come and see!

‘What are you looking for?’, said Jesus to these disciples. ‘Where are you staying?’, they replied. ‘Come and see’ said Jesus. Thus begins Jesus’ ministry in John’s Gospel and it continues among us here today. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
our maker, our lover, our saviour, our friend,
we praise your holy name.
We praise you, Creator of all,
who has come to us in Jesus Christ,
coming amongst us to dwell with us,
to live our life and to suffer our death.
O God you have made us for yourself,
creatures made in your image,
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.
Forgive us we pray that we seek our rest elsewhere.

Forgive us that we search for the wrong things,
follow paths that lead away from life in all its fullness.
O God forgive us for our folly, we pray,
and help us to amend our lives.
Come to us in forgiveness and grace
and dwell with us.
Refocus our lives and lead us back and into truth
and so become visible in us,
that we may bear witness to your truth.
We pray these things in Jesus' name and in his words
we join together and say...