

What are you looking for?

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Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; Matthew 1: 29-42

In today's Gospel we hear of Jesus' first encounter with his disciples — or, perhaps more accurately, their first encounter with him. I find it a particularly accurate and profound representation of how our engagement with the spiritual path starts. To see how, we need to zoom in closely, so I'm going to start by reading the middle verses (35-39) again. So, sit back, relax and shut your eyes, and please try to visualise the scene as it unfolds, tuning in as closely as you can to the *details*: there will be some little tests later!

The next day John [the Baptist] again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

As so often seems to be the case, particularly with John's gospel, at first this might sound a bit bland, and maybe even a little odd. The questions don't quite seem to match up, and there are all those odd little details that glance off each other. But it should come as no surprise that in fact it's spiritual writing of the highest order.

At the beginning to the story we hear that John the Baptist — the man who preached repentance — is standing around with two of his disciples. It seems Jesus' very first would-be disciples were people who had decided they wanted, or needed, to change, and who had taken to hanging around with wise people. But maybe in that hanging around, on what's a new morning, there is also a sense of "so, what do we do next"?

Next, John notices Jesus walking by. Jesus doesn't come up to them, or call them out. He just walks by.

To get behind this it's worth remembering that, particularly in John's Gospel, Jesus is the incarnate Word of God — the divine *logos*, the manifestation in the world of that which is the Pathway to God, of the Truth about the Way things are, and of the Life that is present in all situations.

So as Jesus walks by, before he has said or done anything, we get this feeling that a transforming presence is already around. It's a kind of visible gesture — walking by is a very graceful gesture. And isn't that so often the way with real and profound Truths? They tend not to trumpet their presence. We only notice them some time after they have arrived, perhaps then realising that they have been around for some time, we just didn't see them.

And isn't it also the case that so often it seems to be someone else who seems to notice the truth first. Jesus' would-be disciples need John to tell them "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" before they themselves are able to see, and then to start to follow. I suspect that all of us at some time have had this experience where a respected wise person has had to point us towards where the Truth is headed. If we were blessed enough to have actually heard them, and acted, then we too might have even started following in our own awkward way.

At this stage of the journey the end meanings often aren't clear yet. When John calls Jesus the "Lamb of God", this may have sounded impressively prophetic, but surely it wouldn't have meant much yet concretely to the two would-be disciples?

Next, when the disciples start following Jesus, he turns around and sees them. So the encounter between Jesus and his disciples starts with their decision to follow, and his to turn towards them. It's all very gestural and relational. Often the lessons in our gospels come as much from who people are, the situation they are in, and from what they do, as from what they say. Ours *is* the religion of incarnation. In particular, I find it always pays to give close attention when anyone turns, in particular when it's Jesus who does the turning.

Now comes our first test. Does anyone remember who said what next? ... The initiative came from Jesus, who asked them a question — "what are you looking for?"

This is what I have for some time called an "arrow" question. There are a few of them in the gospels. They're the ones you don't notice at first as they fly through the air, but when they hit they penetrate layer after layer of our armour.

This one at first sounds particularly bland — so bland in fact that it's easy to miss, as I have noticed even some commentaries do (!) But really listen to it and it is in fact the *perfect* question to ask anyone who thinks they might be, or want to be, on some kind of spiritual journey — what are you looking for?

When you came to church today, what were you looking for? Of course I'm sure that we all come in part selflessly to worship the Lord in the beauty of His Holiness, don't we? But if you're anything like me, this spiritual quest thing is also mixed in with some personal agendas too which might include things like: social contact with nice people, keeping in touch with a sense of tradition, maybe to recharge the old batteries a bit to face the coming week? If we're feeling a bit more spiritual we might initially think things like getting in contact with our spiritual natures, promoting a sense of inner peace, pursuing some healing, or maybe even seeking salvation. But then doesn't this raise the question of what we think salvation entails, and why it might be necessary?

The uncomfortable fact is that maybe we don't know exactly what it is we are looking for on spiritual quests. We probably recognise at some level that we've been pointed towards something worthwhile and noble and maybe true and wise so we start to follow. But if we stay true to that call then today's gospel story tells us the almost natural consequence will be that at some stage the Truth will turn around and ask you "what are you looking for" which will, if we let it, reveal in us a kind of nakedness.

Now if it's any consolation, this question is in fact such a big one, that it stays with us, I suspect, for the entire length of our spiritual journey, although our answers almost certainly change as we walk the path and have our perceptions changed about what matters.

At the end of John's gospel, Jesus tells Peter that he will be dragged to a place where he does not want to go, and then Jesus says "follow me". Even here there is an echo of that original question — what are you looking for? When Peter started out as Jesus' disciple I bet he did not have his own upside—down crucifixion in Rome in mind.

Now, this question doesn't just stop with our ideas about what our spiritual aims might be. If you let it sit longer, a further thought can arise. What are you looking for out of life itself? What do I really want? Am I content? If not, why not?

There is a trend around at the moment for people to get life coaches and to develop 5 year plans of their goals, and that sort of thing. These may have their uses, but I have this feeling that in many cases it's partly a cover for the fact that lots of us want to have a meaningful life,

but are not sure what that means, so we, particularly affluent westerners, invent activities and plans.

Do you remember the rich young man's question to Jesus — "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?". Jesus' response was eventually to say to him "go and sell all you have, give it to the poor and follow me". The rich young man couldn't and went away in tears. In effect, his heart had been tested with the question — what are you *really* looking for? He might genuinely have wanted eternal life but, it seems, as an adjunct to a comfortable one now.

Yes — Jesus' entire ministry is *saturated* with echoes of this centrally important spiritual question "what are you looking for?". Which is maybe why in John's gospel these are the very first words that Jesus says to anyone.

And this question can keep on penetrating even deeper. Did you notice that the question is addressed to a person: it was addressed to "you". So, what are *you* looking for? No polite made up answers. No responding as you think you think you should. No. The question is intensely personal: "what do *ye* seek?" to use the King James bible language.

And as we squirm wondering what we really looking for in life, yet another rather troubling doubt can arise: who or what am I, and how do I differ from my restless, seeking urges, which on closer inspection do not actually appear to be what I am *really* looking for. If you reach this point, the arrow has gone in really deep!

So, this question is a truly redemptive Special. It's disarmingly simple and gentle. It doesn't force, or even probe. You can respond in any way you like, including ignoring it, or glossing over it (which is what, I suspect, most people do). That's understandable because it isn't easy. But like most of what Jesus says and does, its power to disturb depends on the level you choose to respond. If we do decide to take it on board, though, we will probably come to love it in that sometimes infuriating faith kind of way. At one level we sense almost from the start that all our answers and our understandings will always be doomed to be provisional and partial and if they become definite they probably just spell pride before a fall. Sometimes we'll draw a blank or feel that it has just exposed that our aims in life seem trivial or empty, and this risks leaving us feeling inadequate and at sea. For these reasons taking this question seriously requires a kind of courage and hopeful persistence to keep on coming back to it. But at the same time, as we persist, taking with us a degree of faith that we will eventually come to have some kind of answer, our knowledge deepens and contentment at a different level of our being grows. And the struggle has its own rewards along the way.

And of course the fact that we know that we will never be entirely happy with our answers, itself ever so gently points towards a way we might get out of our conundrum. The one who asked the question may have an answer... As indeed he did as he started to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven, and about a love that is bigger than life itself.

So, does anyone remember what happens next? One of the disciples responds by saying "Rabbi, where are you staying?". I think this is brilliant. Again, on a superficial reading it sounds rather odd, and maybe a little impertinent. In this story Jesus is the guru the disciples want to follow, although they haven't even met him yet. But this doesn't stop them from feeling able to not answer directly the reasonable question Jesus asked them, but rather to pose one of their own back to him — and what a personal one "where are you staying?"! Unless, that is, you have *really* thought about Jesus' question and grasped something of its significance.

Our disciple didn't fall into the trap of making up something, pretending, saving face, or even saying he didn't know. None of those would have been strictly true, and in any case would

have been an inadequate response. So the question “where are you staying?” gets him, and maybe us, out of a sticky bind. Yet still, the response is honest enough, because isn’t this what all spiritual seekers are probably looking for: don’t we all at some level want to know where the place where ultimate Truth can be found? And by asking about the dwelling place of Jesus, the divine logos, also points towards something Jesus will say much later in John’s gospel, at the last supper — to our very own St Philip in fact — “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”. Fortunately, our beginner disciples don’t need to ponder that one just yet!

I skipped over a detail. The disciple started by addressing Jesus as “Rabbi”. This is the second title Jesus gets given today. The first was when John the Baptist called him the “Lamb of God” and later Andrew gave us a third one when he says “we have seen the Messiah”. The role of “rabbi”, which John underlines for us means “teacher”, however makes it clear that this is the key relationship for a would-be disciple. We have a path to walk and we need to acknowledge Jesus as our guide. I think it’s significant that in contrast from the stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke where Jesus calls the disciples, in John’s Gospel it’s the disciples who start to follow and decide to name Jesus as their teacher.

Which brings us to the next phase of the story. Does anyone remember Jesus’ response to the question “where are you staying?”

On a casual reading Jesus’ response, “come and see”, seems unexpected because, once again, it doesn’t directly answer the question. It implies that if you are genuinely interested in knowing where the Truth dwells, then you will need to come and see for yourself. Maybe the dwelling place of the Truth is not the kind of thing that can be sensibly talked about directly. But again, this is a very gentle and reasonable response. Jesus does not force truths on these disciples or tell them what they must do, or not do.

Jesus issues a rather gracious invitation to explore, to follow, to come to know for themselves, as would any great teacher sensing a genuinely interested student. Christ-Truth has this quality of “come and see” about it which again “our” St Philip goes on to make famous (when he calls Nathaniel). St Philip is the first person to echo any of Jesus’ words, even though, interestingly, he himself had not heard them.

In fact the whole passage has this “come and see” quality. I don’t know of any other religion that starts off by having its founder turn towards his would-be followers and ask them what they might want.

In the last part of the story we are told that the disciples “saw where he was staying” and remained with Jesus for the rest of the day although the nature of that dwelling place is not mentioned. It seems we are left to ponder on an ambiguous little teaser about what this place might be. But the following gorgeous line from the psalmist perhaps typifies the mystical Hebrew view of such things: “O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.” (Ps. 26)

Perhaps the most curious part of the whole story is the little bit tacked on the end when we are told “it was about four o’clock in the afternoon”. Hopefully, if nothing else, I have convinced you so far that our gospel writer has so far been astonishingly efficient and economical in his writing — providing a huge amount spiritual food to chew on via an amazingly small amount of space. It’s done by gestures, a sequence of perfect dialogue, and our sharp and listening attentiveness.

So why suddenly mention the time of day? It may simply be a feature. But it may also be making the rather Zen-like point that our spiritual searching and following takes place in the context of a worldly reality that may be spiritual but is also very concrete. And of course 4 o’clock is both well advanced in the day, but there is still time before midnight. As I don’t

want to keep you all here until 4 o'clock this afternoon, maybe we can discuss afterwards — I'd be interested in any of your theories!

As a final observation, I don't know about you, but I never cease to be amazed at how much there is in these gospels when one goes fishing, listening to the Holy Spirit. Today's story is inexhaustible. Maybe it's the combination of gentleness and ellipse, of glancing surface detail, and penetrating depth.

One of the verses from the today's Old Testament reading particularly caught my eye. Isaiah has the prophesied Messiah say:

The Lord called me before I was born...
He made my mouth like a sharp sword
In the shadow of his hand he hid me;
He made me a polished arrow,
In his quiver he hid me away.

When, in my mind's eye, I see myself walking down a road following a stranger who turns out to be Jesus, and then I see him turn around, look at me gently but intently, and then ask me that ever so reasonable, ever so penetrating, question, "what are you looking for?", I have this sense that a polished arrow that had until then been hidden in the shadow of the hand of God has been fired, and that I will not be the same again.