

Year A

John 1:29-42

I will never forget the day I had a run-in with the three wise men. I was starring in the school nativity play as King Herod and when it came to the point when the wise men arrived at Herod's Palace here was my moment. I remember being overcome with nerves and so when the the chief wise man stood before me and bowed, I, for some strange reason bowed to and we banged heads in front of hundreds of school children who descended into howls of laughter. I can

remember clearly lifting my eyes to the Christ star above and loads of little stars were flying about around it as I struggled to remember my lines. The feast of Epiphany falls on the 6th January every year and on that day the visit of the Magi, the wise men, is marked in the western Church. Epiphany simply means 'manifestation' or 'great revelation'. It refers in the Christian tradition to the 'making known' of Jesus; that God is manifest in him. The Church celebrates epiphany on the one day and then treats the following Sundays as 'Sundays after Epiphany'. However, this tends to sell

short Epiphany because the Gospels clearly record a number of epiphanies, not just one. We can't stop with the wise men. What about the baptism of Jesus? What about the great declaration of John the Baptist which we have read this morning? What about the changing of the water into wine? What about the Transfiguration? So in effect we have a mini Church season which allows us time to think about these manifestations as we ponder the mystery of the incarnation. Epiphany always carried great weight in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In fact, much more so than Christmas. The birth of Jesus

was one of a series of epiphanies in the Orthodox church rather than *the* event which it became in the Western church. And there is something of great merit in that approach. Sometimes we read at Christmastime churches advertising events with the “come and celebrate the baby-Jesus” kind of strap line. The emphasis is on the baby rather than the Christ. That is a distortion which has the potential to skew our understanding of the incarnation. If we emphasise the epiphanies and understand the birth of Christ as one such epiphany, we avoid that kind of trap.

So what kind of epiphany moment are we presented with today? Well, for me the most interesting aspect of this account in John's Gospel is the manner in which the author John places the words and attitude of John the Baptist along side the words and response of the first disciples. John the Baptist begins the passage with the declaration; "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" and goes on to state again when Jesus passed by; "Look, here is the lamb of God". Now, we might not think too much about this, especially if we have been raised in the church and are long

familiar with church language. 'The lamb of God' is a biblical concept and we might have been familiar with that concept most of our days. But we can be very sure that the disciples wouldn't have been. So if you're not familiar with it this morning then you're in the same boat as the disciples! What does John the Baptist mean by 'the lamb of God'. It sounds at best a bit quaint or maybe even just downright strange. Ah, but you might say to me it points to the nature of Jesus as the sacrificial Messiah of God, indicating that his destiny would be as God's unique Passover lamb..... Well, that's way beyond

the first disciples. They wouldn't have had a clue! But you know that didn't particularly matter. They heard the words of John the Baptist and that was enough for them to follow. When Jesus asked them; "What are you looking for?" they couldn't answer him. "Where are you staying?" But that was enough. Enough for them to be shown the way.

A recent survey of children's questions to mum and dad revealed the following most common ones:

- 1 How is electricity made?
- 2 What are black holes?

3 What is infinity?

4 Why is the sky blue?

5 Why do we have a leap year?

6 How do birds fly?

7 Why does cutting onions make you cry?

8 Where does the wind come from?

9 Why is the sea salty?

10 How big is the world?

11 What happens to us when we die?

12 What is a prime number?

13 Is God real?

14 What makes thunder?

15 Why do you blink?

16 Where do babies come from?

17 How do planes fly?

18 What is time?

19 How does Father Christmas get down the chimney?

20 Where does water come from?

How well are you doing with the answers?

Jesus asked a question: a very difficult question and he received a question in return. A child-like question but one that seemed to delight him. “Where are you staying?” In other words, we would like to follow you.

We have a very grand epiphany in the words of John the Baptist: “Look, here is the lamb

of God”. But we have a much simpler, yet in many ways much greater epiphany through the words of the child-like disciples: “Where are you staying”. All we want to do is follow you wherever that may take us. Jesus is someone who is really worth following. And to prove it off went Andrew to find his brother Simon Peter and in so doing became an evangelist. Here is the simple principle of church growth in action. As the Graham Kendrick song goes:

“One shall tell another

And he shall tell his friend

Husbands, wives and children

Shall come following on
From house to house in families
Shall more be gathered in
And lights will shine in every street
So warm and welcoming.”¹

That is the manifestation of the Messiah being proclaimed in action. It would be easy today to focus upon the amazing words of John the Baptist: to allow ourselves to indulge in the sacrificial theology of the lamb of God. However the theology is useless if it is not worked out and lived. It is no good for

¹ <http://www.grahamkendrick.co.uk/songs/graham-kendrick-songs/the-king-is-among-us/one-shall-tell-another-the-wine-of-the-kingdom>

us to live our Christianity in our heads. We can take delight in the wonderful images that the Scriptures can bring to us but if our thoughts are not shaping our walk after Christ then we are missing everything. In that sense, the epiphany of John the Baptist is nothing without the epiphany of Andrew and Simon Peter. A convoluted sermon about the differences between John the Baptist's calling Jesus "the son of God" and Andrew's calling Jesus "the Messiah" might make for an interesting diversion, or not! But it would all be useless if Andrew and his brother were not brought to the foreground.

The call of Christ this morning is the same call that Andrew received. The Greek Orthodox Church name our patron saint Andrew, *protokletos*, first called. He is the first of many millions who have since had an epiphany experience of seeing Jesus in a new way. The 'Rabbi' of Andrew's first impression has become his 'Messiah' before the day has ended. How we need that kind of insight and we trust that through this mini season of Epiphany that we may be granted it.