

Last Sunday afternoon I went to St Paul's Cathedral for a special evensong when three new prebendaries were installed. Two of them, Fr Graham from St Martin's Kensal Rise and Fr Francis from St John the Evangelist Wembley are both in our deanery of churches and so it was lovely to see lots of familiar faces.

A Prebendary Canon is generally a priest within the wider diocese who is given the status of a Canon at the Cathedral, which means they form part of the leadership team there and can bring a wider perspective to cathedral life.

Anyway, it was quite an interesting evensong – and at the start of the service each of the three new prebendaries had to take their oaths of office. So that the service didn't take too long they took the oaths collectively, apart from the first phrase which they each said individually. This created a very interesting effect, so that at the beginning of each statement they would say 'I Francis, I Graham, I John...' In the echoing dome of St Paul's the resonance of these names seem to continue to murmur throughout the oath taking and service. It was with their name, their identity with which they promised to fulfil the role before them.

The power of a name, in the context of the oaths they were taking, was very moving. But before I had gone to the service I had read the readings set for this Sunday – as I do each week, so that they can be swimming around in my consciousness – and it struck me with the echoing of names how much this also at the heart of the interaction we hear in our gospel reading for today. We come as we are – in the identity of our name.

So much of the season of Epiphany, and its readings and prayers, is about confirming the name and identity of Jesus. The key theme of this season is how God is manifest to humanity, or how God is shown to each of us and those who are around us. As we marked Epiphany with the placing of the Magi in the crib – Epiphany in a liturgical sense marks that moment when God revealed himself to the world through the incarnation of Jesus, and during season of Epiphany we listen to stories which reveal the true nature of Christ – from his baptism, to his first miracle – to the reading we hear today as the first disciples recognise Jesus for who he is.

Today's Gospel, as well as the other readings we have heard point us to not only the mystery of the Divine, but also the wonder of humanity – and each encourages us to consider our own part in the story. Where do we encounter the revelation of God in our own lives – and also in what ways do we claim our faith in our name – how do we live out the promises we have made in our own baptism.

Our Gospel reading begins with John, the forerunner of Christ, and Jesus cousin who has a clear role to play. John has never doubted God, and in fact, we only see one account in all the Gospels when John even questions Jesus divinity (and we focused on that reading during John's imprisonment before Christmas). John has many disciples of his own as he preachers a need for all to leave lives of sin, that is lives that do not honour God, behind and seek forgiveness and worship God. John's

message at one level is very simple, if often hard to carry out. But John also has a secondary message – I am here to prepare you, but one is coming who will change the world forever. All of John's ministry is focused on pointing us towards Jesus – pointing us towards God. In some senses it is the purpose of all our lives, that we should live in such a way that points always to God through the example of Jesus.

Audrey West<sup>1</sup>, and theologian from Chicago puts John's example this way "It is not about me." Whenever people in the Fourth Gospel ask John the Baptist who he is. He is not the Christ, not Elijah, not the prophet, not even a man worthy enough to untie the sandals of the One who is to come: no matter what people think of his ministry out there across the river. Again and again he points away from himself to this Other, whether responding to the religious authorities from Jerusalem (John 1:19) or to his own disciples (John 3:25). To many ears, John's refusal to claim his own status is almost laughable. Hasn't he heard about the need for good self-esteem or the importance of promoting your own giftedness? If John the Baptist had a social-networking page on the Internet, his icon would be an image of a long finger, pointing away from himself, and every response to a comment from his friends would be something like, "Go to Jesus page".

And in a sense that is exactly what Andrew and Simon do – so as John points out Jesus, they leave John and follow him. But Jesus first question to them is confronting - "What are you looking for?" (v38) This English translation obscure the meaning of the Greek, which is better translated, "What are you seeking?"<sup>2</sup> In John's account, Jesus' ministry begins not with a mighty command to silence a demon, as in Mark; nor with a sermon to the crowds who have gathered on a mountain, as in Matthew; and not with a quotation from Isaiah to proclaim his anointing for the year of God's favour, as in Luke, but it begins with a question: "What are you seeking?" What are you looking for? What do you need? It is a question worth wrestling with.

When we come to Jesus, when we come to prayer each day, when we come to worship collectively, when we wrestle with God in our dreams at night – what is it we are seeking? What are our expectations of God? What do we need and want?

The disciples respond to this question with their own question – where are staying? Theologians suggest that they are not asking Jesus for the location of his tent, or the address of the house he is staying; they want to know about the enduring, permanent, eternal, undying dwelling place of this Messiah of God. Where are you staying? Where can we find you? Where shall we go to be with you, to receive what you have to offer? Where can we be in the very presence of God?

Jesus answer to this question – this deep, deep question about our relationship with God is simple and straight forward – and remains the same for us as it did for the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3114](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3114)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3114](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3114)

Andrew and Simon – ‘come and see’. If we want to know God, if we want to have our name affirmed, as Peter does – we have to come to Jesus.

The recognition of Jesus is a powerful thing, and paradoxically as we see in the gospel some of this seeing will be in the ordinary and some in the more miraculous. This paradox is sometimes unsettling. But as one commentary pointed out when reflecting on this passage – the difference between ordinary and the extraordinary – is a recognition of what is taking place – in other words noticing the present of Jesus in all that we encounter – even if it is not in ways we might want or expect.

When we seek Jesus, when we come and see Jesus – we have faith in God – we inherit the promise which we heard in Isaiah, and we embody what is explained in Corinthians. Because at one level faith is simple. We come, we seek – and Jesus calls us by name – and we come and see all that is possible in a world where God is at the heart of everything. This is the resonance of the name of Jesus, with our name echoing with it around a dome.

This is what the writer to the Hebrews try to sum up when they writes *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* (Hebrews 11:1)

So, the question then is, when we come to worship today, when we look with longing or hope into the year ahead – what do we seek from God. Is it certainty or relief, is it wisdom or strength, is it peace – personal or global? And like the disciples are we prepared to work for the answers, to unpack what God is offering – to do the hard work which faith requires to help us to discern how we are part of transforming this world into the kingdom of God – to find the extraordinary in the ordinary.

And so like the first disciples we are invited to respond to Jesus and in turn gaze upon the wisdom of God . We are in invited to say ‘I ...(insert your name), am a follower of Christ, and hear our voices echo around the heavens. – Or as we will sing in our offertory hymn:

*Just as I am, of that free love  
the breadth, length, depth and height to prove  
here for a season, then above  
O lamb of God, I come.*