

JOHN AND JESUS



John 1:35 "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!'"

I have always found today's Gospel story rather perplexing. It has often reminded me of those seven terrible words that every Rector hates to hear, and yet hears them so often. Indeed, I have heard those seven terrible words many times here since I arrived at St. John's, and perhaps even from some of you; the seven-word phrase that goes "You know what you need to do?" You know what you need to do, someone will ask me rhetorically, and then they will proceed to tell me exactly what *they* think I need

to do. And no matter what that something is, it is not something that the questioner is already doing. They are not inviting me to join them in some activity; they are simply telling me what they want *me* to do, for them, not with them. That's what's happening in this Gospel this morning.

The story begins with the familiar figure of John the Baptist. John, of course, was that great voice that had been crying out in the wilderness, calling the nation of Israel to repent and to cleanse themselves, and to prepare for the way of the Lord, declaring that the Messiah was coming and that we need to get ready to follow him. Even so, John himself felt undeserving at first to baptize Jesus when Jesus came to the River Jordan, where in Matthew's account "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" John said elsewhere that he was not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. It was also John, according to this Gospel account today, who saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Jesus at his Baptism, confirming him as the long expected One, while a voice from heaven declared, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

And so now in today's story, it is, we are told the day after Jesus' Baptism (so apparently the Holy Spirit did not immediately drive Jesus off into the wilderness after his Baptism as Mark's Gospel suggests). And we see John the Baptist

standing in the streets of Bethany, who as he looks up, lo and behold, there is Jesus coming toward him. And what does John the Baptist do? He bears witness again to Jesus for all those in earshot, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," he says. What effect that has on the crowd, we are not told. And then on the very next day, John was standing again in the streets of Bethany, now with a couple of his own disciples, and he sees Jesus walk by, and again he bears witness to him, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" he says. And thereafter those two disciples of John left him and followed Jesus, with one of them, Andrew, we are told, first going to find his brother Simon Peter, and so these three seem to become the first followers of Jesus after his baptism.

What I cannot make sense of in this story, though, is why John the Baptist did not himself get up and follow Jesus too. For here was he for whom he was eagerly awaiting. Here was he to whom he bore witness out there in the desert. Here was he to whom he was calling the nation of Israel to repent and whose way to prepare. And yet John did not follow him. Instead, John the Baptist seems to be saying to his disciples, "You know what you need to do?" You need to follow that guy. That's what you need to do, but it is not something that John does.

So why didn't John the Baptist become a disciple of Jesus? Why wasn't he eager to go hear his words and see the wonders of

the long-expected Messiah? How could he let him just walk away from where he was standing, not once but twice? Indeed, why didn't John follow Jesus after he first recognized him as the Messiah there at the River Jordan days before? When John saw the dove descend upon him and heard the voice from heaven? I find it very, very difficult to understand why John the Baptist didn't get up and go after Jesus in today's Gospel, why he let Jesus just walk away from him on these several occasions, and even to take two of his own disciples away from him.

The answer usually given, of course, is that John's role as the herald of the Messiah was ended now, now that the Messiah had come. I find this answer very theologically neat, but not necessarily convincing. The very fact that John didn't go off and follow Jesus on any of those occasions makes me wonder how certain John was, that Jesus was the one long expected. And perhaps this suspicion is confirmed after John is arrested later and sends two of his disciples from his prison cell to ask Jesus specifically whether he was indeed the one who was to come, or whether should they be looking for another? (Lk.7.19)

Today's story, I now believe, like several of those in the Gospels about John the Baptist, seems to me to be more theological oriented than historically factual. They seem to reflect more the concerns of the Gospel writers than the actual details of Jesus' and John's various encounters. We know, for

instance, that there was some serious division and dispute between the disciples of John and those of Jesus, both while Jesus lived and especially later in the early Christian church. At one point in John's Gospel (3.22-26), Jesus and his disciples were baptizing in the River Jordan near to where John the Baptist was baptizing, when a dispute arose between some of John's disciples and the others. So, John's disciples came to the Baptist and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to Him." In Luke's Gospel (7.28), after the disciples of John are sent to Jesus from John's prison cell, asking whether he is the one or should they wait for another, Jesus goes out of his way to praise John the Baptist, saying, "among those who are born of women there is no greater prophet than John the Baptist." Then in Acts (19.1-7) St. Paul converts some disciples of John the Baptist to be followers of Jesus. Thus, I suspect now that today's story is just another attempt to smooth over relations between these two religious parties by suggesting that John clearly recognized that Jesus was the one who was to come, and even encouraged his own disciples to get up and follow him. These stories were perhaps attempts to legitimize Jesus to the remaining followers of John.

For John's later execution must have devastated his band of disciples. The Gospels, interestingly, tell us that Jesus did

not begin to preach until after John was arrested. And the message, we are told, he preached was the exact same one as John's. Jesus seems to have taken up John's ministry after John's arrest and execution. And it is clear that some of the disciples of John, although clearly not all of them, saw in Jesus the fulfillment of John's predictions.

However, Jesus' ministry and message also differed significantly from John's. Jesus, for instance, did not seek to separate himself from the sinners and tax-collectors as John did out there in the wilderness. Indeed, whole communities of expectant Jews, like those at Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, purposely moved out into the wilderness in preparation for the coming Messiah to separate themselves from the defiled crowds in the cities. But Jesus sought instead to dine with the tax collectors and sinners, and assure them of God's love and mercy. Jesus also did not seek to cast judgment or revenge upon his enemies, but to turn the other cheek and to love them, and to teach us to love them as well, while John had castigated those enemies of his message, that brood of vipers, who warned them to flee from the wrath that is to come! Clearly not all of John's followers liked Jesus' changes to John's message and tactics. Jesus' manifestation of a God of great love differed from John's revengeful, wrathful God of power, one to

be feared. But that was not the Epiphany of God that Jesus made known.

So then, are we a John the Baptist kind of Christian? Are we the kind of Christian who bears witness to Jesus, but does not follow after him? Are we the kind of Christian who tells others what they should believe, ("Behold there is the Lamb of God") but do not act upon those beliefs ourselves? Are we the kind of Christian who witnesses great signs and wonders, but still stands off to the side, only willing to encourage others to go and follow after them? Are we the kind of Christian who easily condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees of our day, as John did with vehemence, but won't eat with the sinners and tax-collectors as Jesus did, won't make friends with harlots and zealots, won't talk to Samaritans or the outcast, won't turn the other cheek? What kind of Christians are we? Are we the kind who tells others what they should do and what they should believe, or are we the kind who invites others to join with us in our calling and our ministry, in a mission to love and serve God's people, especially the poor and the outcast?

We as Christians are called to follow Jesus and to make Jesus' message and ministry known in our lives. We are called to be like Christ, not in our judgments of one another, but in our mercy and understanding. By our love they shall know that we are

his disciples, Jesus said. And we are his disciples, because we are all baptized in Jesus' Name, not John's. AMEN.