

Sermon on John 1:29-42. Arnhem, Jan. 19th 2020.

Holy Spirit, be present among us, because if you are present, then nothing else matters. And if you are not, then nothing else matters. Amen.

I would have loved to be there that day. To be present at that first meeting of Jesus and his first disciples, Andrew and an unnamed one. What did they talk about? Which questions did the disciples ask him? What did Jesus tell them about his life until then? Did he share with them the stories that his parents had told him? What did he want to know about them? Their lives, jobs, families, views? What did they have for dinner?

I will just have to live with my curiosity and not-knowing. Because the only thing that John finds important enough to share with us, is that trivial question: Rabbi, where are you staying? And even that question is not explicitly answered in the text. It is in Bethany, probably, as John the Baptist was working in the vicinity of that village. Was it the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus? And was this the start of their long-lasting friendship and hospitality, all through Jesus' ministry? I would have loved to know...

Let us assume that this unnamed disciple is John the Evangelist, the one who is writing the story. There are good reasons for that, although I will leave those aside for now. John and Andrew were disciples of John the Baptist. They had assisted him in his work for some time, and listened to his preaching about the kingdom of God approaching. We know from the other gospels that John preached that people had to repent and start a new life, to be fit to receive the coming Messiah. A people under Roman occupation, longing for deliverance, would be more than willing to do so, if it meant that their miseries would come to an end in the near future. Messianic expectations at that time were still quite 'nationalistic', if I may use that word: centered on the deliverance and restoration of Israel and the royal house of David. Israel would be a free nation again, where people would live according to the laws of the Lord, in freedom and without fear – something that both Mary and Zachariah had been singing about.

But then Jesus came passing by, and the Baptist got all excited: There he is! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! It was something he had never mentioned before in his preaching. It may be difficult for us to really feel

the shocking shift that John the Baptist makes here, calling Jesus the Lamb of God. It is shockingly humiliating: not a king, but a lamb. But this lamb is also said to take away the sin of the whole world. It is shockingly universal. This lamb of God is also said to be the Son of God. It is shockingly cosmic and divine. No wonder the disciples are fascinated. John had already told them to expect somebody more important than himself, so now they must have felt that this was the moment. This was the time to move on, with the blessing of the Baptist himself. And off they went, following Jesus, no doubt too shy to approach him directly. I'm sure Jesus did not need that special sensitivity he showed later on with the hemorrhaging woman – he must have noticed the commotion behind him, and have decided to take the initiative. What are you looking for? Rabbi, where are you staying? Come and see.

Rabbi, where are you staying? It was a simple question and no doubt meant as such: a simple question about his lodgings. You have to start somewhere, even if you already know that what is going on is all way beyond you. But in John's narrative the question has acquired a deeper meaning, and so has Jesus' answer. Come and see. In the narrative it is not just about his lodgings. It is not just about that day. It is about everything that was to follow. It is an invitation to be part of the whole thing. To be there when it is all happening; not just during Jesus' three years on earth, but also afterwards, during what would follow after his death and resurrection. All this time, the disciples saw where Jesus was staying: they came to recognize him as the Son of God living among us, bringing healing; not just to them – not just to Israel, but to this whole broken, miserable, wounded, hurting, sinful world. He truly was Emmanuel, God with us. And so it is this simple question that John is working with in his famous opening paragraph. Rabbi, where are you staying? God, where are you? Answer: the Word became flesh and lived among us.

That's where he was staying! That's where he is staying! In Jesus God is forever part of humanity, staying with human beings, living among us. He has come to stay! And we are invited to come and see. To be witness to his ongoing presence in the world, and to be part of that presence ourselves. To be a light to those living in darkness. To live out his grace and truth.

Rabbi, where are you staying?

Haven't you noticed by now that I am staying with you?