

What do you want? (John 1:35-42) – Encounters with Jesus 1: Andrew

The first in our series on encounters with Jesus in John's gospel. This sermon preached at the beginning of 2021 looks at the question 'What do you want?' We see Andrew and another (could it be John the writer of the gospel?) encountering Jesus for the first time.

What do you want in 2021?

At the start of the New Year, one of the common questions is:

'What is your New Year's resolution?'

New Year's resolutions can be helpful,
but there is a more important question that needs to be answered first:

"What do you want in 2021?"

Of course the answer to that may lead you to make a resolution:

I want to be fitter - my resolution is to go running every day.

I want to know more - my resolution is to read more books.

I want to be nicer - my resolution is to stop shouting at people.

Good though these desires are, however, do they really plumb the depths of what we really want from life? Are our ambitions too small? Do they really capture what matters?

Do I limit what I want to what I think I can achieve?

Are my desires shaped too much by what other people seem to run after,
or what the media tells me I should want?

Am I only interested in short term desires focussed on immediate problems?

John's Gospel

John's gospel begins with a grand sweeping cosmic vision:

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," (vs. 1)

"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind..." (vs. 4)

"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." (vs. 9)

Compared with our limited vision and feeble ambitions this is big talk.

Of course John is talking about Jesus, "The Word made flesh".

But what is the first thing Jesus says in this gospel? When Andrew and another disciple (possibly John, the writer himself) first meet Jesus, what does he say to them?

"What do you want?" (vs. 37)

The way we respond to someone asking us such a question, of course depends on who that person is.

If you go into a shop and the shopkeeper says, "What do you want?" then we will tell them what we want to buy.

If you are going for a job interview, and the interviewer asks you that question, you will tell them what you hope you will gain from having the job.

If you are a child talking to a parent just before Christmas, you might respond by telling them what present you would like.

The way we answer the question depends on what we think the person who is asking the question can give us. Now imagine that you are face to face with:

- the one who is God,
- the one can give life
- the one who is the true light

How then would you respond to the question from Jesus: "What do you want?"

At this stage of course, Andrew and the other disciple didn't know the cosmic background to who Jesus is. To them he would have seemed like any other man.

And yet, these were two disciples of John the Baptist. Like John they would have been expectant and excited that God was about to do something amazing.

So already their vision was bigger and their desires more ambitious because their focus was on God and his purposes.

This was their first encounter with Jesus, it was the start of a journey of exploration that would in the end lead them to conclude in the words of John 1:14:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Perhaps as we wonder about how to answer the question, "What do you want?" We can learn a lot from the attitude of Andrew and this other disciple.

So, what were the disciples of John looking for and what did they find?

Lamb of God... (God's Solution, cf. 1:29)

The first thing to say is that they were responding to what John the Baptist had said. He pointed out Jesus to them and said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

On the face of it this is a very strange thing to say, but if you go back to verse 29-34, you'll see that John says a lot more about who the Lamb of God is:

he takes away the sin of the world,
he is the one who is greater than John the Baptist,
in some sense he came before John the Baptist,
he was the reason John the Baptist came,
John had seen the Holy Spirit come down upon him and rest on him,
he is the one who is the Son of God.

All of this would have been amazing and exciting for John's followers. No wonder they wanted to find out more about Jesus.

But, why does John sum all this up under the strange title: 'the lamb of God'?

To be honest no-one is quite sure.

And yet, the idea of the 'lamb of God' would have had many connections for Jews.

Perhaps the most powerful one for Jews, was the idea of the Passover Lamb. This lamb was sacrificed every year in the temple at Passover as a memory of when God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Jews sacrificed and ate a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their households.

At the Passover, God gave Israel the freedom from slavery that they wanted in Egypt.

The story reminded the Jews, that God rescued them from slavery and death. John says that Jesus is, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'. This is a more ambitious rescue plan:

- it is not just for Jews, but the world,
- not from slavery to another power, but sin - our fundamental corruption and problem
- and ultimately from death, because the teaching of the Bible is that the wages of sin is death.

Just as the Passover Lamb reminded the Jews of God's solution to the problem of their slavery to Egypt, so the Lamb of God was going to be God's solution to our most fundamental problems - sin and death.

How much of all this those first two disciples grasped we can't be sure, but what they wanted was God to sort out their most important problems. They wanted help from God.

- So what do you want? Do you want a solution to your most fundamental problems, the sin in you, that means that you do not always think, say or do what is good? That can eat away at your most important relationships and lead you into shame and guilt. Do you want a solution to your death? The one problem we are all powerless to deal with -no matter how much we succeed in putting it off. If you want these things, then Jesus is God's answer, he is God's rescue plan from sin and death.

Rabbi (God's Teaching)

So, Andrew and the other disciple followed Jesus because John the Baptist pointed them to Jesus as the Lamb of God. Yet, when Jesus asked them, "What do you want?" they replied, "Rabbi (which means teacher), 'where are you staying?'" (1:38b)

The implication is that they wanted to learn from Jesus. They wanted to hear his teaching. They wanted to know more about what God was doing and how they could play their part.

And it says they spent the day with him. There was obviously something about Jesus's teaching that was captivating and exciting that meant they wanted to learn more.

Later on they would declare that he was full of 'grace and truth.' He was the light of the world. They wanted to know God's truth and they felt that they had found it in him.

- So what do you want? Do you want to know the truth? It is a question that will keep recurring in John's gospel. Some people believe Jesus and want to know more of his truth, whilst others reject the truth. The truth can be uncomfortable, it can reveal things about us we would rather not admit, it can show us that we need to change, it can demolish our cherished delusions.

Yet, Jesus says later on in the gospel:

"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31b-32)

If you want to know truth, then come to Jesus as your Rabbi, as your teacher.

Christ (God's Ruler)

Andrew and the other disciple wanted to be taught, but they were also looking for something more and after a day with Jesus, they thought they had found it.

Andrew excitedly goes to find his brother Simon and says to him:

"We have found the Messiah!" (that is the Christ).

The Jews were expecting God to send them a King. One who would rule righteously and lead them into God's ways and bring them salvations and protection from their enemies. Who would bring in a true Kingdom of God. This was spiritual and political hope rolled into one and it was rooted in the promises of God.

And Andrew concludes after following John the Baptist's direction and spending a day with Jesus that he is indeed, the one God had promised. Andrew wanted God's special ruler, and now God had sent him!

No doubt, Simon was also looking for God's promised ruler, which is why Andrew went to tell Simon. But, Simon got more than he reckoned for. The first thing Jesus does as a ruler is to rename Simon. He calls him Cephas, which translated into Greek is Peter and translated into English is Rock!!

We don't know if Simon wanted a new role and purpose in life, but we do know that later on when Jesus called him he left everything to follow him. Simon definitely embraced this new direction and role. He would become the 'rock' as along with the other disciples he would take a lead in building the foundations of the new Kingdom, Jesus was bringing in, by sharing the truth that Jesus brought with the World that He was God's rescue plan from sin and death.

- So, are you looking for a purpose and direction in life? Do you want Jesus be your ruler as Simon and Andrew and the other disciples did? Do you want to play a part in bringing about God's Kingdom in the world, by sharing the truth about Jesus?

What do you want?

Perhaps I have taken you too far too quickly as we have explored this first encounter with Jesus at the start of 2021. Already we have seen that encountering Jesus challenges us to think more deeply about what we want from life.

Jesus can offer us far more than we can dream of. When we are faced by Jesus with the question, "What do you want?" the possibilities are far greater than we can imagine.

Yet, we are also challenged to reassess our priorities and directions to see the world as God sees the world, to seek the truth about the world that may challenge our previous understandings and to accept a new direction and purpose in life as we enter into God's Kingdom with God's king.

Join me over the coming weeks as we explore more encounters with Jesus and discover if this is really what you might want.