

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 19 2020

John 1:29-51 (NIV)

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³²Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

³⁵The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

³⁹“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

⁴⁰Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

⁴⁶“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

⁴⁸“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

⁵⁰Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” ⁵¹He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

Sermon: “Who is Jesus? Come and See!”

Imagine you’re writing a religious book; how would you formulate your work so that people would *want* to read it? Obviously, you’d have to make it an interesting and exciting read – a real “page turner.” Since it’s a serious work, it would need to address real questions that are people asking and be relevant to everyday life. The book must entice the audience *into* its world and we, as its readers, must feel drawn in and become engaged by it. John’s gospel is such a book! It begins with the profound and mysterious “prologue” that we always read at Christmas time: “*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”¹ This majestic introduction echoes the creation story at the beginning of Genesis,² and this prologue ends with a shocking and grandiose claim: “And that Word *became flesh* and *lived* among us, and *we* have seen his glory.”³ Anyone interested in the Creator God and the crazy notion that such a God has entered history in human form - in a particular time and place - should be inquisitive enough to read more. Yes, some might be inclined to dismiss this claim as ridiculous; but aren’t we just a *little* bit curious as to why a seemingly-sane author would make such a bold claim?⁴ Who *is* this “God-in-human-form”? John says it’s Jesus; “Come and see,” he says, and he invites us his readers into the story.

Although John’s introduction *is* enticing, his terminology can seem to be obscure and confusing to us. Its true, John’s gospel is very different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. It’s rich with symbolism and theological commentary, which – I agree - can make it hard to understand at first glance. But it’s worth being persistent in mining those deep depths for the gold nuggets the author wanted us to discover and appreciate. Are you skeptical? That’s OK – so was Nathaniel – when he first met Jesus; yet he had his *mind* changed.⁵ Surprising things happen when you meet God incarnate – “come and see”!

John responds to our “Who is this ‘Jesus’?” question in a myriad of ways. In addition to claiming Jesus is the “Word made Flesh,”⁶ in his opening chapter he also says Jesus is “the light to all mankind,”⁷ the “Son of God,”⁸ the “Messiah” or “God’s Anointed One” (in Hebrew) or the “Christ” (in Greek),⁹ the

¹ John 1:1-3.

² Evidence that this is deliberate is found in John’s repeated use of “the next day” (John 1:29,35,43), mirroring Genesis 1.

³ John 1:14.

⁴ After all, the style and choice of words (especially in Greek) don’t read/sound like those of a crank!

⁵ “Simon” even had his *identity* changed when he followed Jesus, and became “Peter” (John 1:42).

⁶ John 1:1,14. God’s “word” to a Jew is powerful and effective and – along with the divine spirit – is the means *through* which God works in the world. What God *says* will assuredly come to pass (see Gen 1). In the Greco-Roman world, the (divine) “Word” (*logos*) is the supreme rational principle that underlies all that is. The “Word-made-flesh” is thus a powerful notion.

⁷ John 1:4-5, 7-9.

⁸ John 1:14,18,49. The title “Son of God” should *not* be seen in a *trinitarian* sense here. Rather, as a multi-faceted title that had subtle-yet-profound meanings to both Jews (royal, highly-honoured by God, or Messiah) and non-Jews (a divine being – e.g., a ‘dead’ Caesar). In the 1st century *Judeo-Christian* context, “Son of God” (or “Son”) is virtually synonymous with “Messiah” (e.g., John 11:27; 20:31).

⁹ John 1:17,34,41. Jesus is also described as “the one Moses wrote about” and “whom the prophets also wrote,” 1:44.

“Lamb of God,”¹⁰ “Rabbi or Teacher,”¹¹ “Jesus of Nazareth,”¹² the “son of Joseph,”¹³ the “King of Israel,”¹⁴ and the “Son of Man.”¹⁵ What a list! Some of those titles stress the *humanness* of Jesus, others say that Jesus has the closest possible relationship with God,¹⁶ and is even the co-creator of all that is.¹⁷ Are these claim’s wrong or misguided? We need to reserve judgement and read on. The author presents some of these titles *through* the words of *witnesses*, like John the Baptist, Andrew, Philip, and Nathaniel. They are using such expressions to describe the *roles* and *functions* of the *person* and *work* of Jesus. Yes, *we* can be confused and overwhelmed by all these descriptive titles, but John’s readers were no doubt aware of at least *some* of those names. While John is laying out all these titles, he is *not* saying we can pick and choose from them as we like. No, they *all* applicable to Jesus and, as the gospel continues, the meaning of *all* these names will be expanded, transformed, or redefined by the words of *other* witnesses, by those of Jesus himself, and by his actions - including his death and resurrection. “Whatever you have heard about Jesus of Nazareth, come and discover more,” says John. So as we read this book today, let’s *not* be limited by *our* preconceived ideas. Instead, let’s keep our minds and eyes open to God’s unprecedented revelation in this season of epiphany. “The God we secretly yearn for is no longer hidden, but is now revealed,”¹⁸ says John.

It’s curious, don’t you think, that the first words that John puts in the mouth of Jesus is a probing question to a potential follower; he asks: “What do you want?” Or, “What you seeking?”¹⁹ It’s as if the author is asking his readers, “What is it that *you* want?” The men then asked Jesus, “Teacher, where are you staying?”²⁰ “Come and see,” says Jesus, and so they went and saw where he was staying.²¹ At this point in John’s gospel, Jesus hadn’t performed any miracles or given any teaching and yet at least two of John the Baptist’s disciples were already willing to follow him. One of them was Andrew. We are told that the first thing Andrew did was to find his brother, Simon, and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” [or the Christ]. They he brought him to Jesus.²² What happened to Andrew? Just a few hours earlier he referred to Jesus as “teacher,” now he is calling him the “Messiah”? John does not tell us. But based on what Andrew had already experienced of Jesus, he informs his brother and introduces him to Jesus. An important principle is revealed here: *friends invite other friends to come and meet Jesus.*

¹⁰ John 1:35. This link of Jesus to Passover lamb is a key theme for John; see John 19:14, Isa 53:7,10. In the exodus, the lamb that was killed allowed the Jewish people to escape from slavery (Exod 12:1–13). Jesus’ death, in this picture, allows people to be liberated from bondage and the power of sin throughout the world, indeed the whole of creation.

¹¹ John 1:38,49.

¹² John 1:44.

¹³ John 1:44. John reveals Jesus’ true origins in his Prologue; through the eyes of faith we know that Joseph is not Jesus’ father. This introduces a tension that John will revisit in terms of Jesus’ true origin; see John 6: 42; 7:42.

¹⁴ John 1:49. See Ps 2:7; 2 Sam7:12–14.

¹⁵ John 1:51. “Son of Man” alludes to Daniel’s vision 7:13–14. This (popular) apocalyptic tradition is assumed by John and it is linked with Jesus without explanation or an argument.

¹⁶ John 1:18.

¹⁷ John 1:3.

¹⁸ See John 1:14,18. Or the (human) “Jesus of history” is the (divine) “Christ of faith.”

¹⁹ John 1:38. John does *not* define “discipleship” in terms of the formal, 12 disciples; (he never lists them)!

²⁰ John 1:38b. The “staying” could also imply “abiding,” a rich term that John uses later, e.g., see John 15:1-17.

²¹ John 1:39a. “Seeing” (the opposite to blindness) is a theme on John: see John 1:46; 6:36; 9:35–41; 14:9.

²² John 1:41-42a. Andrew is a man who seems habitually to introduce others to Jesus, see John 1:41-42; 6:8–9; 12:21-22.

The next day, it is Jesus who finds Philip and says, “Follow me.”²³ Philip then finds *his* friend Nathaniel and tells him “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”²⁴ Nathaniel picks up on the “Nazareth” part, since he himself came from nearby Cana,²⁵ and responds, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”²⁶ Nathaniel’s negative bias is evident; small-town Nazareth is nothing special. So even in this opening chapter, John presents the first negative response of someone initially hearing about Jesus, namely a reaction of skepticism. It is interesting that John is the only gospel writer to tell us about [so-called] “doubting Thomas” and his post-resurrection encounter with Jesus.²⁷ John’s gospel therefore begins and ends with skeptics. It is as if he has a special affinity with those who doubt and question, and wants to address them. Jesus does not condemn skepticism but engages people where they are at. Having questions and doubts is a legitimate starting point to the call of Jesus. But it can’t be the last word. A skeptic has to suspend their doubts for a moment if they are *ever* going to learn something new. Note that Philip does not respond or argue with Nathaniel, but simply says, “Come and see.”²⁸

What happens next? Jesus says, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”²⁹ In the Old Testament we read of twin brothers Jacob and Esau. Jacob is described as being full of cunning and deceit. Later God changes Jacob’s name to “Israel.” And Jesus describes Nathaniel as “a true Israelite, one with no deceit”, someone who is a model of faithfulness – the very opposite of Jacob. Nathaniel is stunned by Jesus’ apparent foreknowledge; his initial skepticism is replaced by a profound confession of faith, “Teacher, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”³⁰ As before, John simply drops these titles on us - his readers - with no explanation as to their meaning. As I said earlier, John will reveal more in his gospel if we are curious enough to read on. But let me say just one thing in passing, when you hear the title “Son of God” in the New Testament, *don’t* equate that with the 2nd person of the Trinity. Belief in the Trinity is part of our Christian confession today, but in the 1st century the term “Son of God” is virtually synonymous with the Jewish title “Messiah” or “God’s Chosen One.”³¹

John’s prologue is a tantalising start to his book and he concludes his first chapter in an equally dramatic way. Jesus, in response Nathaniel’s confession of faith, says to his audience: “I tell *all of you* the solemn truth, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of

²³ John 1:43.

²⁴ John 1:45. The latter is a very human title for Jesus, the former description indicates his is very special. (No OT texts cited.)

²⁵ John 21:2. Cana is about 10km from Nazareth. (Popular tradition identifies Nathaniel with Bartholomew, since name is next to that of Philip – see Matt 10:3 and Mark 3:18.)

²⁶ John 1:46. Nazareth (indeed Galilee) had no special status to Jews, or had any messianic links/expectations (unlike Bethlehem), so Nathaniel’s somewhat contemptuous comment is understandable!

²⁷ John 20:24-29. Jesus effectively says to Thomas, “Come and see” (my wounds) and adds, “Stop doubting and believe.” See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/What-Evidence-Do-You-Require.pdf>

²⁸ John 1:46b. Conversion is an act of God’s Spirit, but we have a role to play.

²⁹ John 1:47.

³⁰ John 1:49. Nathaniel is, effectively, witnessing to and claiming to have seen “God’s glory” (1:14,18). See also Thomas’ transformation and confession of faith in John 20:28-29.

³¹ See John 11:27; 20:31. I appreciate that I have not here explained the meaning of “Messiah”!

Man.”³² What on earth does this mean? Let’s explore it briefly, because that message is for *all* John’s readers too – including us today. The “Son of Man” is a reference to a person in a strange apocalyptic vision in Daniel 7, who came from heaven and was given divine authority and power. Indeed, all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him and his reign would never end.³³ Jews under oppression, as they then were by the Romans, found great hope in God’s intervention revealed in this vision and they wondered when it would happen. Jesus is implying that this vision’s fulfilment is happening *now* – right before Nathaniel’s eyes. “Are you hooked yet?” John asks of his readers. “Are you curious? Then read on!”

This image of “the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,”³⁴ connects with another incident relating to Jacob, namely Jacob’s vision of the ladder going up to heaven in Genesis 28.³⁵ As I mentioned earlier, Jacob was hardly what you would call a nice or a good man; in fact he was a cheat – he even cheated his twin brother! Because of that, Jacob was literally on the run afraid that his brother Esau would kill him. Jacob’s world is one of uncertainty over the future and fear for his very life. Exhausted he sleeps and God gives him a vision where Jacob sees a ladder connecting to heaven with angels going up and down it. In that vision God reassures Jacob that all the peoples of the world will be blessed through him that that he will protect Jacob wherever he goes and bring him back to this land. When Jacob woke up, he said “Wow, God is in this *place* and I didn’t realize it.”³⁶ In Jacob’s science fiction-like vision, it is if God opened the curtain to the neighbouring dimension that links heaven and earth and what he glimpses are angels busy doing *God’s* work behind the scenes. This image of angels going up and down the ladder is like seeing all the cogs and gears behind the face of a mechanical clock. Just as there is much more to the clock than we imagine when we see only its face, so there is more to the world than meets our eyes. But we have to have the “eyes of faith” to recognise that God is busy at work – especially when life circumstances seem otherwise.

With that image mind, the gospel writer is telling us that God’s angels will be descending and ascending the ladder between God’s realm and our domain – busy revealing *God at work* in all that *Jesus* does. Again, this proclaims that *God’s activity is no longer hidden but is revealed*, which is also the language of Epiphany. Jesus is, then, no ordinary person or prophet; God is going to do *remarkable* and *surprising* things through him. John invites us to *come and see what God is doing in Jesus*.³⁷

Whether we are young or old, John invites us today to follow this same Jesus and to tell *our* friends what Jesus means to *us* and be a part of what God is *now* doing in the world. For those who are skeptical, Jesus comes to where you are right now, just as he did then with Nathaniel and Thomas, and says, “What do *you* want?” “What are *you* seeking? Are you looking for erudite, sophisticated explanations?”

³² John 1:51.

³³ Dan 7:13-14. (Note this vision speaks of *all* nations worshipping the “Son of Man,” not just Jews.)

³⁴ John 1:51.

³⁵ Gen 28:10-22. (It also speaks of “*all* the peoples of the world” being blessed through Jacob/Israel (28:14b).)

³⁶ Gen 28:16.

³⁷ This connects to the beginning prologue where John writes that, “The Word became flesh and *lived among us* and we have seen his *glory*” (John 1:14). The locus of God’s activity on earth is to be *through* the “Son of Man,” Jesus.

Are you looking for positions of power and influence? Are you looking for radical change the world order? Are you looking for security or riches? Are you looking for a place to belong? Or do you, as John hopes, really want to encounter the living God-made-flesh and be transformed by him? “Come and see” is the invitation. Are you willing to open your “eyes of faith” and see the “Jesus of history” as *God’s* Chosen One who, by his Spirit, is *still* at work in the world today? I encourage you to reflect on that challenge and be curious. Why not set aside some time over the next few weeks to read John’s short book again. Not as a devotional or as an aid to meditation, but to take up John’s challenge. See if his thesis makes sense. Does the rest of the book demonstrate God at work? That *God’s activity is no longer hidden or secret but is disclosed and accessible*. And, if so, what is it that God is doing?

Finally, how is that ongoing activity of God evident in here at St. Andrew’s now, in 2020? Dare we say to our friends, “Come and see God at work here - in *this* place?” AMEN. Let us pray.