Edmund Newey

In nomine…

Over the last couple of decades our Sunday scripture readings in the Church of England have been taken from something called the Revised Common Lectionary. Not the most gripping way to begin a sermon, I know, but bear with me: the Revised Common Lectionary isn’t quite such a turn-off as you might think! The key is the adjective ‘common’. Used dismissively, the word means demotic, plebeian, unrefined. Its liturgical sense is rather different: common here means shared and it means public: common land, common currency, and, at this time of the year, the common cold! The Book of Common Prayer…, Common Worship, the Presbyterian Book of Common Order, our hymn book Common Praise. Of course the fact that there is a shelf full of different liturgical books all claiming the term common is a bit of a paradox: the aim is laudable one that we should be one as Christ wished us to be, the reality remains rather different.

But in the Revised Common Lectionary the adjective common is a little more accurate. This lectionary is used by a very wide range of churches from the Methodists to the Roman Catholics. It’s also used widely in other parts of the world. Today, two hours ahead of us, our friends in St Cyprian’s Cathedral, Kimberley were hearing and reflecting on exactly the same readings as us; as were our brothers and sisters in Christchurch, NZ, eleven hours ahead of them. The Revised Common Lectionary is a small sign of the things we do hold in common with our fellow Christians, a sign that what we long for in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, is not quite so far off as it sometimes feels.

The lectionary works on a three-year cycle. This year, since Advent Sunday, we have been focussing on Matthew’s gospel; next year it will be the turn of Mark, and the year after, Luke. You might wonder where in this scheme the fourth gospel fits in, the great gospel according to John. Well, the lectionary doesn’t forget Saint John; what it does is make use of his gospel at particular seasons of the Church’s year, especially at its high points: Christmas, Holy Week and Easter. It might seem a little unfair to single John out, but you have to remember that among the gospels, John is something of an eccentric. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story of Jesus’s life in a very similar way, but John is an outlier. It’s no surprise that the symbol for Saint John’s gospel is an eagle, soaring powerfully, wings outspread.
What’s different about John’s gospel is that it works as much by suggestion and symbolism as by narrative. When the other gospel-writers want to tell us something about Jesus, generally they tell a story, perhaps a parable or a healing miracle. Most of the time John doesn’t do that. Instead he’ll give us a series of images or symbols: Jesus as the bread of life, the light of the world, the door of the sheepfold, the true vine and, most famously, in his first chapter, the Word, who was with God from the beginning.

Listen again to the part of his gospel we heard today:

> The next day John… was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. (John 1:35-39)

That passage is typical of John’s gospel. On one level it’s trying to be quite realistic: we’re told what time it was, what day it was, who Jesus was with. But whereas a story like this told by one of the other gospel-writers would flow smoothly, this sounds all a bit stilted. And that, I think, is deliberate. John doesn’t want us to get carried away by the story. Instead he wants us to think about what is said. The short passages of direct speech are the key, four of them in total:
- John the Baptist’s words, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’
- Jesus’s question to the disciples, ‘What are you looking for?’
- their question in reply, ‘Where are you staying?’
- and finally Jesus’s invitation, ‘Come and see’

I’d like us, briefly, to think about each of those sayings.
First, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God’. Those are the words often said immediately before we receive communion: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world’. What they do is to identify Jesus with the Passover lamb of the OT, slaughtered as a reminder of Israel’s deliverance, and with the suffering servant of Isaiah, who ‘like a lamb that is led to the slaughter…was wounded for our transgressions’. Here in six words John identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s purposes in the OT.
Next, Jesus’s question, ‘What are you looking for?’. It sounds a pretty everyday question, but it’s not, because in John’s gospel it looks forward to two other questions. In the eighteenth chapter of the gospel, as the soldiers approach Jesus to arrest him, he will ask them, **Whom are you looking for?**; and again, in chapter twenty, in the garden on Easter morning, he will ask Mary Magdalen, ‘**whom are you looking for?**’. **What** are you looking for? **Whom** are you looking for? - those are questions directed at us, as much as at the disciples. The answer is Christ, the Messiah. But do the disciples – do we – understand all that that means?

Then the disciples’ question to Jesus, ‘**where are you staying?**’. Again it sounds everyday, almost banal, but it isn’t. The verb ‘to stay’ is the same verb translated elsewhere in the gospel as ‘to remain’ or ‘to abide’. ‘**I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him**’; and later: ‘**Abide in me as I abide in you. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine… neither can you unless you abide in me**’ (John 15:4). The answer to the disciples’ question: ‘where are you staying / remaining / abiding?’ is the mystery of Jesus’s whole being, his union with the Father and the Spirit. ‘**By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit**’.

And finally, Jesus’s reply; ‘**Come and see**’. That is the great invitation at the heart of Christian life. ‘**Come and see**’ - words of invitation, words of hospitality. If only we could hear them more clearly and respond to them more fully. ‘**Come and see**’ is the invitation God gives to a needy, hungry world, a world where souls and bodies alike cry out in sorrow and pain, but often do not know where to turn.

So in a week when geo-politics takes an uncertain turn, let us ask ourselves the questions that John’s demanding and difficult gospel puts to us: ‘**What are we looking for?**’; ‘**where is Christ staying, abiding in our world today?**’. Let us keep our eyes open for Christ in our midst – ‘**Look, here is the Lamb of God**’ - and let us heed the invitation to come and share in the life of his kingdom: ‘**Come… and see**’.