

14 January 2023

**Come and See (John 1. 29-42)**

© Sarah Bachelard

Last week, someone I know made the depressing observation that once you get to the end of January, the year's over! It's a little exaggerated mayhap (!), but I guess many of us feel the sense of it – there's that lovely post-Christmas pause, the summer slowdown in early January (at least in the southern hemisphere), but then gradually you feel the year ramping up. Arrangements being put in place, notices about groups reconvening, the return to work and school and university ... and before you know it, whoosh, we're off! It's Lent and then Easter and then ... well, the year's over!

And I have to say that the church's post-Christmas readings don't do anything to help extend our sense of the time. No sooner has the baby arrived (a mere 3 weeks ago) than he is fully grown and embarked on his public ministry. By the end of the first week in January (liturgically speaking), the adult Jesus has been baptised in the river Jordan and thereafter events unfold at pace. Allowing for some variation between the gospel narratives, these events include a stint in the wilderness, his first words of proclamation and the calling of the first disciples – and whoosh, we're off!

In all this, part of what's struck me this year is how early the disciples enter the picture. Narratively speaking, Jesus has only just fully entered into his *own* sense of call, yet immediately he's calling others to join him, to follow him, to stay with him. Is this a sign of an insecure, wannabe guru, shoring up his fragile identity by requiring the validation of others? And if not, what is this about? What is it in *Jesus'* vocation that necessitates the immediate involvement of others, of us? We often speak about discipleship from our perspective ... how to be good disciples, how to become disciples. But what is the significance of discipleship from, so to speak, God's perspective? Why is the calling of disciples foundational in Jesus' ministry?

Many of you will know that the Latin root for the word, 'disciple', is *discere* meaning 'to learn'; likewise the New Testament Greek word, '*mathetes*', refers to those who learn from another. Disciples are learners. And by and large, In the ancient world, the form learning took was what we'd call practical and 'experiential'.<sup>1</sup> It wasn't like doing an academic degree – studying ideas, reading books, writing essays, and joining online tutorials. It was more like an apprenticeship in which learning happened through the sharing of a way of life. Teachers and disciples stayed together, ate and talked together. Disciples saw how their teacher engaged the world around, and practised the disciplines that would enable them to become *like* the teacher, and thus to attain the same wisdom and realise the same transformation.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is said to have taken the initiative in enrolling his 'pupils'. Walking by the Sea of Galilee, he spies two brothers fishing – Andrew and Simon (who is to be called Peter), and shortly afterwards James and John (sons of Zebedee). He tells them they are to become 'fishers of men', and commands them to 'Follow me'. In the gospel of John, however, what's depicted is more like a transfer of students from one teacher to another. Jesus is as yet unknown, and it's John the Baptist who is the established authority. When John identifies Jesus as a teacher greater than he, he also – in effect – hands over his disciples. Listen again to our passage: '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' (John 1.35-37).

Now, behind this text, who knows exactly what is going on. There are various hints in the gospels of tensions between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus – rivalry, as it were, between schools. The gospel writers are clearly concerned to signal that John himself understood he was not the main act. 'After me, comes one who is greater than I', he is said to insist. And later, 'I must decrease and he must increase' (John 3.30), though you wonder if it was more complicated than that at the

---

<sup>1</sup> See Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. by Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

time. Remember that moment when, from prison, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, 'are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Matthew 11.3). In the reading we just heard, however, any doubt or conflict is smoothed over. John is depicted as clearly seeing the truth of Jesus, pointing explicitly away from himself, giving his disciples permission to leave him to follow another.

But this returns us to our opening question. Why does Jesus want disciples? Why is the calling of disciples foundational to his ministry, pretty much the first thing he does? Well – as with teachers in every spiritual tradition – it has to do with the nature of the truth he seeks to communicate. For it is not abstract or theoretical truth – a formula that could be written up on a blackboard, capable of being shared across time as marks on a page. It's truth that can only become known, tested and verified in lives ... and in the corporate life of communities. After all, how could anyone come to know God apart from undergoing the impact of God over time? How could you begin to grasp God's meaning apart from experiencing God's action in and through your life? The way it brings freedom within and changes the quality of relationships, awakens new perceptions and possibilities, enables recognition of what limits and distorts human being?

In her poem, 'Getting it Across', Ursula Fanthorpe imagines Jesus complaining how difficult it is to teach this truth:

This is the hard thing.  
Not being God, the Son of Man,  
—I was born for that part—  
But patiently incising on these yokel faces,  
Mystified, bored and mortal,  
The vital mnemonics they never remember

Her imagined Jesus complains about his disciples' constant misunderstanding, their comical ineptitude.

I envy Moses, who could choose  
The diuturnity of stone for waymarks  
Between man and Me. ...  
The prophets too, however luckless  
Their lives and instructions, inscribed on wood,

Papyrus, walls, their jaundiced oracles.

I alone must write on flesh.

And yet, he goes on, this is the only way to make his message known. 'I am tattooing God on their makeshift lives'. Just as God has always, in Hebrew understanding, sought to teach God's people those habits of being that will connect them more deeply to truth, such that through them the invisible God becomes visible, embodied and real in the life of the world. That is why Jesus calls and must call disciples. 'These numskulls are my medium. I called them', says Fanthorpe's Jesus. 'They are the dear, the human, the dense, for whom my message is'.

Of course, from our point of view, this call to become disciples seems a high-risk venture. How do we know the Teacher is trustworthy? How do we know we are following the (or at least 'a') way to life? Well, we don't and can't know this, in the abstract. As disciples, part of what we have to learn is the trustworthiness of our teacher. We have to be willing to experience his impact on our lives and discover for ourselves whether, in his company, we are enlarged or made smaller, enlivened or deadened, more or less connected to the reality of ourselves and others.

But what's comforting to me is that Jesus is depicted as giving his would-be disciples a lot of time and space to make up their minds about him, a lot of freedom to come and go. When Jesus saw the two disciples of John following after him, he asked them, 'What are you looking for?' And when they indicated their desire to learn from him – 'Teacher, where are you staying?' – he doesn't ask them to sign up to the Four Spiritual Laws, or pledge their undying allegiance out of nowhere. He simply invites them to hang out with him awhile: 'Come and see'. There's seems an in-built spaciousness and non-violence in this divine pedagogy. So though the year may begin in a whoosh, though the gospels are clipping along at a good pace, there's also something here about trusting the process and letting our journeys of faith take the time they take. And that seems a good thing for we would-be disciples to be reminded of half-way through January!