Who is he?
Livestream 10am 17/01/21

Before the service: StF347 Crown him with many crowns

Welcome

StF356 Jesus shall take the highest honour

We pray together the prayer “Glory to God in the highest”:

Glory to God in the highest,
and peace to God’s people on earth.

Lord God, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.

Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us.
You are seated at the right hand of the Father:
Receive our prayer.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit.
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Let us confess our sins to God.

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought and word and deed.
We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.

Silence

In your mercy,
forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be;
that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If we confess our sins,
God is faithful and just
And will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
Amen. Thanks be to God.
Do you know what your name means? Does it describe who you are or what you are? Beverley – English name meaning person from the place where beavers live. Mark – Latin name from Mars, the god of war.

The prayer with which we began our service used quite a few different names and titles for Jesus, all from the Bible of course and some of which we will be looking at later. But think of the ones you know about Jesus and see if you can work out what they are saying about who and what he is. For example, the name Jesus means ‘God saves.’ And the name we use for him at Christmas, Emmanuel, means “God is with us”. They tell us quite a lot about who Jesus is and what his life on earth was about.

Now listen carefully as we have our Bible reading for today and try to pick out the different names and titles for Jesus that you hear:

John 1:29-51

If you had your Bibles open for the reading then you might want to keep them open. I’m sticking very close to the text today.

Have you ever read the fourth gospel right through? Have you ever compared it to the other three? It’s very interesting, very different to the other three. It’s not simply an account of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. It is something much more than this. The writer has chosen his material very carefully, and positioned it all very carefully, in order to put across his message in a particular way.

The verses we’ve read today form part of the second section of the fourth gospel. The first is the prologue, the overture - you know, the passage we hear at Christmas about the Word. This second section, which starts at v19, is the first scene, the curtain-raiser, and we see action and words that set the scene for the rest of the story.

But what sort of story is the fourth gospel? Is it a purely historical fact non-fiction biography? No, there’s much more to it than that. So what sort of genre is it? Is it science fiction, fantasy, novel, what?

I’ll tell you what I think it is. I think it’s a quest story.

What is a quest? “The act of seeking something, a search, a journey, an undertaking in pursuit of a noble goal.”

I think the fourth gospel should not simply be called, the gospel according to John. I think it should have a sub-title, “Seeking the Saviour.”

The Greek word for “to seek” (zetein) is used 34 times in the fourth gospel, a quarter of its usage across the New Testament. That’s a huge proportion concentrated in one part.

The question the writer wants us to ask all the way through it is, “Who and what is this man Jesus?” It’s not a who dunnit but a who is it… The whole gospel is written as an invitation to discover who Jesus really is. Until you realise that you’ll struggle to understand why the gospel is written as it is. But now I’ve told you, you can read it in a new light. Go on – read the whole thing in order like you would an Agatha Christie. And you’ll find clues everywhere to lead you to the answer to the question, who is he?

The passage before us today is a classic example of what I’m talking about. Let me show you what I mean.
Each paragraph starts, “The next day...” then a little scene follows, and in every scene there are people seeking Jesus and trying to understand who he is. They attribute names and titles to him as they do so, as they seek to understand more about him – names like Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah, Christ, King of Israel, Son of Man.

In the other gospels the equivalent passages are titled “The Call of the First Disciples.” If your bible also puts the same title across this passage in the fourth gospel, they haven’t understood what the gospel is about, they’ve missed the point. Jesus does not call the disciples in this gospel, they come seeking him. So in the passage in front of us, only Philip is called when Jesus says, “Follow me”, everybody else comes seeking Jesus.

So you see what I mean when I say that the writer of the fourth gospel uses his material very differently to the other gospel writers. It’s very interesting why he does so, and the reason I’m harping on about it is because I think there is something important we need to learn from this.

There is a pattern in the seeker stories, of which there are loads across the gospel. The ones in our passage show the pattern clearly. For each seeker, this is the pattern:

- First of all, they receive a witness from someone else. The first person, John the Baptist, receives his witness direct from God, v33. But after this, one person witnesses to another in a chain. Sometimes the seeker will be offered an invitation, “Come and see.” Come and see this amazing man. Could he be who we have been looking for?
- This is where the names come in, as the witness tries to explain who it is they have encountered. John the Baptist calls him the Son of God and the Lamb of God.
- The seeker searches out Jesus, and follows him, not because he knows exactly who and what he is, but because he wants to find out more.
- Then follows a time of enquiry and encounter. The seeker gets to engage with Jesus and the witnesses, asking questions and having questions asked in return. Questions like “Who do you seek?”, “What do you want?”, “Where are you staying?”, “How do we find out more about you?”
  “Come and see,” is the response.
- Not every seeker’s quest concludes successfully. As you work through the gospel, you will find that some of the seekers turn away, some close their minds, some choose against Jesus.
- But in every successful seeker’s story, this time of enquiry concludes with an encounter with Jesus himself. And it is the encounter with Jesus that leads to the final stage in the pattern which is…
- A decision to accept Jesus, to choose for him, a confession of who Jesus is, and the seeker becoming a witness for Jesus.

Now do you see why I’m explaining this?

It is the same beautiful pattern for our own stories of coming to faith, is it not, for most of us at least?

Someone witnesses to us about how faith has changed their lives. We are curious. More than curious because we know that our lives are unfulfilled, there’s something missing, there must be more to life than this, but what is it? I must find it...

So we come, hesitantly perhaps, sceptically perhaps, even cynically like Nathaniel, but we come, because we want to know, we need to know, is there something in this faith, something in this God, this Jesus, who can answer our need for meaning and fulfilment.
We ask questions, we get some answers but not all, we try to pin Jesus down by giving him names and titles but they only hint at what we are discovering. Finally, we reach a point of revelation – the point where we realise we will never have all the answers to our questions but that this a journey we are now committed to, a quest we are willing to undertake because we can see that the treasure is there, we can see that Jesus is the Way. And so we give ourselves to him and confess him as Lord and Saviour.

And having done so, we too become witnesses to others. “Look, we have found the Christ. We have found the way to God. Come and see.”

This doesn't mean that this is the end of our quest. Is there any one of us who believes they fully know Christ, that they can name him, pin him down, that there is nothing else they need to know about him and about God? No, of course not. Our quest continues. It is a life-long commitment to learning and growing, to reviewing and amending our understanding, and building our relationship with God in Christ.

I hope this has proved an interesting way of looking at the fourth gospel this morning. Maybe you’ve never heard it described in these terms before. If so, I hope it leads to new insights for you. I hope it helps you find new ways of understanding and articulating your own personal faith journey in terms of questing and seeking. That in itself, is helpful for building ourselves up in the faith. It certainly helps me a lot.

Thinking of the gospel in this way and of faith in this way is also very helpful when you are talking to people who are not yet Christians. I don’t mean people with closed minds, I mean people who are seekers, who want to find what is missing in their lives.

The concept of a quest is something that non-believers understand. Think of Indiana Jones, Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, The Wizard of Oz, Harry Potter, many of those computer games. I could go on and on and on. They are all based on quests. Our culture is fascinated by the idea of questing.

So surely, there is an opportunity here, an opportunity to witness in these seeker terms, to offer an invitation to seekers to come on a quest to discover for themselves where the treasure lies, where ultimate meaning can be found.

We need to find ways in which we can relate to such people and I think the fourth gospel can help us here. It can help us to understand that we don’t have to have all the answers. On the contrary, it’s better not to try to have pat answers for people’s questions. It’s better simply to witness and to invite. “Look, this is the difference faith has made to me. Come and see!”.

So the fourth gospel asks us to have a change of attitude, a change from thinking that we have to know all the answers before we can be good witnesses to Christ, and a change from thinking that once we’ve got some answers we know it all. The fourth gospel invites us to a more humble place, a more accessible place – that is, to understand that we are journeying together on a quest to deepen our relationship with God in Christ, that our quest is not yet completed, and that it’s OK to be an unfinished product, on unfinished business.

One final thing I want to say – at the end of the Bible passage Jesus promises Nathaniel that what he’s seen so far is only the beginning. And the word “you” in “You will see” is in the plural even though at the time Jesus is talking to one man. Why is this? I think it’s because Jesus is not only talking to the one man, Nathaniel, thousands of years ago. He is talking to us, inviting us to walk with him, to “come and see” the treasures he has in store for us. What we’ve seen and experienced so far is only the beginning. There is more to discover, more to see, more to experience, spiritual treasures that are far beyond anything we can imagine or describe. Jesus
is inviting us to come questing with him and asking us to invite others to come along too. What an invitation, what an adventure!

StF350 I cannot tell why he whom angels worship

In faith let us pray to God our Father,
in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God of love, we pray for the life of your Church throughout the world at this time as we seek to find ways to continue to enable worship, fellowship, caring, learning and service in your name. May every congregation be a community of love held together by your Spirit, and every Christian a witness to your ongoing grace and care during this difficult period. Renew all who worship you that we may be a fellowship bound together by your Spirit and empowered by your Spirit to serve our neighbourhood.

Silence

Your kingdom come.
**Your will be done.**

God of mercy, we pray for the life of the world at this time, for all those who exercise power and hold authority, for all the front-line workers as they work in the struggle to overcome the virus. Show us how to live as members of one human family, caring for one another, bearing one another’s burdens and working together for health, wholeness, peace and justice.

Silence

Your kingdom come.
**Your will be done.**

God of compassion, we pray for those who are ill or anxious, at home or in hospital. We pray for those whose lives are filled with fear or despair. Draw near with your saving love and bring healing, hope and peace.

Silence

Your kingdom come.
**Your will be done.**

God of glory, we give thanks for all those who have gone before us in the faith: those who have recently died and gone home to you, those who have accompanied us on the path of life, those who have given us a godly example by their way of living. Help us to follow in their footsteps and bring glory to your name.

Silence

Your kingdom come.
**Your will be done.**

Loving and merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding. Pour into our hearts such love for you that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire or even imagine. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen
We say the Lord’s prayer together, in the modern form:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

StF357 Jesus – the name high over all (Behold the Lamb!)

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord make his face to shine on you and be gracious to you,
the Lord look on you with kindness and give you peace. Amen.

After the service: StF15 The splendour of the King