

## 2. SEEING JESUS FOR WHO HE REALLY IS

### John 1v19-51.

John Piper: *“When we see Jesus for who he really is, we savour him. That is, we delight in him as true and beautiful and satisfying..... “There is no more important issue in life than seeing Jesus for who he really is and savouring what we see above all else.”* (‘Seeing and Savouring Jesus Christ’)

It is this conviction that lies behind our series in John’s Gospel. Week after week we will fill our minds and hearts with Jesus. In these verses tonight a variety of people face the issue of ‘Seeing Jesus for who He really is’ for the first time and from different starting points.

#### Introduction to ch. 1v19-51.

Jesus public ministry can be divided into three phases. One year from His baptism to the imprisonment of John the Baptist. Two years from John’s imprisonment to the declaration of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Then six months to the Cross. The first year, was a comparatively quiet period. Matthew, Mark & Luke tell us very little about it, so John fills in this gap. The first five chapters of the Fourth Gospel are devoted to this first phase. So, this account of Jesus’ earliest meeting with his first disciples is unique to John’s Gospel.

It begins with an official deputation from the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem investigating John the Baptist because he was at the hub of an unprecedented spiritual awakening which had clear Messianic overtones.

Messiah? (“Christ”) is a concept woven through the Hebrew scriptures in many strands. Messiah would be Redeemer, Prophet, King of Righteousness and Holy Priest. He would both suffer and be exalted. He would be a Servant and yet a glorious heavenly Son of Man. God’s “Anointed.”

When questioned, John denies outright being the Messiah, **v20. “I am not the Christ.”** Notice the pattern here. John’s interrogators start by asking if he is Messiah. When he says “no” they go back to the prophet Malachi who said that Elijah would come before the Messiah. “Are you Elijah?” No. Then they go back further to Moses who had said God would raise up a prophet like himself. “Are you the Prophet?” No.

Note: John’s denial that he is the Elijah figure only superficially contradicts Matth. 11v14. where Jesus says of him, “if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.” It is one thing to claim to be such a figure, it is quite another to have the Messiah identify you as such.

When John is allowed to speak for himself he takes them to the central Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40v3. He is preparing the way for the Messiah. **“I am the voice of one calling in the desert, “Make straight the way for the Lord.”**” (v23) He is the Messiah’s forerunner, a herald of the approaching King. He was a witness to the light of the world. (John 1v6-9)

I suspect Jesus was there in the crowd as John talked to the experts from Jerusalem. Perhaps he caught Jesus' eye in the crowd when he said: **"I baptise you with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."** (v26,27)

No two people ever have exactly the same experience of seeing Jesus for who he really is. But every one of us needs revelation. We need our eyes opening. Let's look at the experience of a variety of people in this passage of scripture.

## **1. JOHN THE BAPTIST'S RECOGNITION OF JESUS. v29-34.**

The day after his cross-examination, John sees Jesus and identifies him publicly as the One he has been preparing for. **"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."** (v29) John has not worked it out by intellectual brilliance. He is not relying on intuition, He has not cross questioned lots of candidates. He saw Jesus for who he really was, by revelation. His eyes were opened.

God told him what to look for. A sign. Something he alone could see and recognise and interpret. v32-34. **"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."** (See Matth. 3v13-17)

We have already said that no two people ever have exactly the same experience of seeing Jesus for who he really is. Certainly John the Baptist's experience of recognising Jesus was unique; it will not be repeated. But every one of us needs revelation to recognise who Jesus is. We are spiritually blind; we need our eyes opening. We are spiritually dead; we need to be awakened. We are spiritually dull; we need to be enlightened.

Some people's background might require some unique sign pointing to Jesus. For example, there are some remarkable stories emerging from a particular night during the Muslim observation of Ramadan. The 27th day of Ramadan is remembered as the night when Muhammad received his first revelation of the Qur'an in a cave on Mount Hira near Mecca in AD 610. Today Muslims believe this is a special night when God gives particular heed to prayers, often giving dreams & visions. Many devout Muslims will pray all night. They call it "the Night of Power" or "the Night of Destiny", because according to the Qur'an, just as Muhammad's destiny was changed on this date so it will be for others too. There are many stories emerging from Muslim nations of people seeing visions of Jesus on this night.

## **2. ANDREW & JOHN'S PURSUIT OF JESUS. v35-42.**

Some people only come to see Jesus for who He really is after a pursuit. We catch a glimpse of this in vv35-42. When John the Baptist saw Jesus the following day he pointed him out to two of his own disciples. Andrew is named, but the other

unnamed disciple is almost certainly the Gospel writer. Spurred on by John they went after Jesus.

**v38,39. Turning round, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” “Come” he replied, and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him.** This is a strange conversation. What is happening here? And why couldn't these two have come up with a better question?

According to Jewish Bible teacher Arnold Fruchtenbaum, this is typical of a sequence of events familiar to rabbis in the first century. If someone wanted to be the disciple of a particular rabbi there was an established procedure. First, follow the rabbi at a distance (not too close to be a nuisance, and not too far away to go unnoticed). This might last for hours, days or weeks and continued until the rabbi turned and asked “What do you want?” Prospective disciples then replied as these two did. “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Then the rabbi could respond in one of two ways. Either “What business is that of yours?” In other words, I'm not interested. Or “Come and see”, i.e. accepting them.

We can encourage people to pursue Jesus with confidence. e.g. Go on an Alpha course. e.g. Pray and ask to Jesus to reveal Himself. e.g. Start to read the Gospels. We can encourage people to seek Jesus, because the Bible tells us that Jesus is seeking them before they ever seek Him.

In some cases the pursuit may be a long one. It took John Bunyan, author of ‘The Pilgrim's Progress’, several years before he finally came to full faith and enjoyment of Christ. Having lived a dissolute life in his youth, Bunyan's search for Jesus was sparked in 1651 by overhearing “four poor women” in his home town of Bedford talking of “*how God had visited their souls with His love in the Lord Jesus.*”

Bunyan's search sometimes caused him to feel despair over his condition. He talked to those who knew Jesus, attended meetings of an independent congregation, prayed, and avidly read the Bible.

*“ But one day, as I was passing in the field ... suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, “Thy righteousness is in heaven”; and methought withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand: there, I say, was my righteousness. I also saw moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, “The same yesterday, today, and forever.” Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed; I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; ... now went I also home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God. Oh! methought, Christ! Christ! there was nothing but Christ that was before my eyes.”*  
(‘Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners’. J. Bunyan. 1666)

Jesus loves to be pursued because He wants to be found. Philip Yancey (‘Reaching for the Invisible God.’ Zondervan. 2000) compares this with a game of hide-and- seek. A small child will often give their position away, and a grown up might say

“You’re supposed to be still & hide quietly!” But the fun in hide-and-seek is being found. Who wants to be left alone, undiscovered? So, Jesus loves to be pursued because he wants to be found. He wants to be known.

**It was about the tenth hour.(v39)** The Gospel writer even records the actual time of day when Jesus met his first two disciples, the tenth hour, 4.0 o’clock in the afternoon Jewish time. (v39) This was the turning point of his life. Meeting Jesus. Seeing Jesus for who he really was. His life would never be the same again.

They told Simon, Andrew’s brother (Peter), **“We have found the Messiah”.** (v41) Ah, yes. But who found whom?

### **3. NATHANAEL’S ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS. v43-51.**

The action in these first three days has taken place “at Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.” (v28) This is just a few miles south of the Sea of Galilee. The next day saw Jesus further north in Galilee itself, probably Bethsaida, a town at the northern lakeside .

Jesus took the initiative this time with Philip, and invited him to follow. Philip went straight to his friend Nathanael saying, **“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.”** But Nathanael was not impressed by this description of Jesus.

How do people tend to make their assessment of you when they meet you? In the west, it is often by asking “What do you do?” “What’s your business”, “Where do you work?” As the answers come you are categorised. A judgement is made about your worth. Whether you are an equal, or not. A picture of your capabilities, education, financial profile emerge. The way you are treated is affected by what you do. In the east it is very different.

In the east it is not what you do, but where you come from that gives all the information people need. Ravi Zacharias (with his Indian background) says that in the east it is questions like, “Which is your home city?” “Which part of town did you live in?” “What did your father do?” that are asked. He writes: *“In the east, the home is the defining cultural indicator. Everything that determines who you are and what your future bodes is tied into your heritage and your social standing. Absolutely everything.”* (‘R. Zacharias. ‘Jesus Among Other Gods’. Word. 2000.)

Philip has met Jesus and can think of nothing but this wonderful person. So when he goes to Nathanael and blurts out the usual eastern description, including Jesus’ home town and parentage, he doesn’t realise that it will sound unimpressive. Nazareth was a place of very low repute and Jesus did not come from a prestigious family. **v46-49. “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.** Philip is very wise in his answer. Rather than argue he says, **“Come and see”**. Meet him for yourself.

**v47. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” “How do you know me?” Nathanael**

**asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you.” Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”** Nathanael had not been impressed until he encountered Jesus for himself. Then he went to the other extreme. Why such a dramatic change?

Clearly Jesus said something that Nathanael recognised; something so personal to him that no one else could know; indeed we still do not know. Something he was meditating on under the fig tree. He had come to “check out” Jesus and instead, this stranger was laying bare his inner thoughts & defining his character. Whatever it was it caused this cautious man to pour out the most astonishing words: **“Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.”**

Still today some come to see Jesus for who He really is by an encounter in which their lives are laid bare. Sometimes this may be by the spiritual gift of “a word of knowledge.” (1 Cor.12v8)

**v50,51. Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” He then added, “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”** Jesus recalls the story from Genesis 28 where Jacob had a dream in which a ladder reached up into heaven from where he slept. Above him stood the Lord God, who said “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac” (Gen.28v13). When he woke Jacob said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.... How awesome is this place.” (Gen.28v16,17)

Jesus is saying “If you explode with praise at the little I have shown you about yourself, how much more awaits you when you catch a fuller glimpse of my glory.” Nathanael had made the mistake of measuring Jesus’ worth by where He came from. But soon he will learn that *wherever* Jesus is, however lowly the place might be, that place becomes the gateway of heaven.

John Wilthew. 11th September 2004

**(NOTE. This message was punctuated with the personal stories of four people present on the evening.)**

