



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1999  
by Mark Ashton

10p

John 1:43-51

Twenty/twenty vision

We reach today the final paragraph of this long first chapter of John's gospel; but I want us to take the opportunity to look at the whole of the chapter. It's our normal practice here each Sunday to work through the Bible sequentially, more or less verse by verse. When you do that sometimes you miss the patterns and the structure in whole chapters or longer stretches of the Bible.

So instead of reading the chapter we are going to step back and look at all of it before we focus in on those final paragraphs.

Firstly I want you to notice how the chapter is structured (and the heading for that comes with apologies to a Burt Lancaster film so old that only a few on the lower deck will remember it.)

### 1) From Eternity to Here

Verses 1-18 of John chapter 1 are what is known as the Prologue, which introduced us to the Word:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning [out in eternity, before time and space]. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* (vv 1-4).

But this Word was coming into that world that He had made: *The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to*

*become children of God . . .* (vv 9-12). Then glance on to verse 14: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Then on to the last verse of the Prologue: *No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.* (v 18).

After that build-up, any new reader of John's gospel would have only one question on his/her lips: Who? And the next section (vv 19-28) is about John the Baptist, one particular man at one particular point in history, saying, "It's not me": *He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ"* (v 20). But then in the next section, verses 29-34, John the Baptist says, "It is him": *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* And John then describes the whole of his own ministry in terms of identifying Jesus to the Jews as their Messiah. He did it by inviting them to be baptised, because baptism was a sign that they needed their sin taken away—and Jesus was the Lamb of God who would do precisely that. So those who accepted John's baptism would be those who would recognise Jesus as their Messiah.

### The Next Day

*(and you will see that the three final divisions of the chapter are all marked by the repetition of those three words: verses 29, 35 and 43).*

The next day (vv 35-42) we read of John specifically identifying Jesus to two of his (John's) disciples, who immediately leave John and follow Jesus (which is exactly what John would have wanted them to do). And one of them, Andrew,

immediately recruits his brother Simon Peter: *Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus* (vv 40-42a).

In the final section—the next 'The next day' (vv 43-51)—Jesus finds Philip and Philip finds Nathanael (of which more hereafter).

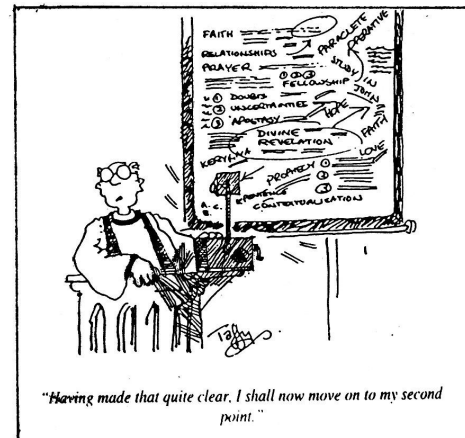
So, a chapter that begins in eternity with the light for the whole world, ends with individuals following Christ. We start with Christ for every man, and we end with Christ for particular men. There is a tremendous sweep from eternity down into time. Those first 18 verses are full of great doctrinal truths, but the chapter ends with the practical response of particular, specific people. Look again at verses 11 and 12: *He came to that which was his own [God's own people, the Jews], but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God . . .* So what do we find happening at the end of the chapter? Most of Israel will reject him, but at the end of the chapter Jesus meets a true Israelite, Nathanael, who declares: *Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel* (v 49).

This is always the thrust of the Bible: from eternity to here and now, from doctrine to practice. A Biblical faith is never just an intellectual matter. When you and I meet the sort of Christianity that resides only in the brain and on the tongue, that loves to listen to sermons, to discuss, to argue, to define and to consider, but never does the washing up . . . or apologises, we have not met the real thing. But nor is Biblical faith ever confined merely to the practical. The sort of Christianity that is driven along by feelings and is suspicious of doctrine and of serious Bible study isn't Biblical Christianity either. We need to remember how many illiterate people have taught themselves to read specifically so that they can read the Bible. They know it is Bible truth that changes life.

Perhaps some here this morning love to come and have their intellectual palates tickled by the sermon. But they would never go home and say to their nearest and dearest, "I'm sorry, I have not been living the way I ought to live. I've decided to

change. Jesus Christ is going to take control of this part of my life, or that." Perhaps others here love the buzz of big numbers of a gathering like this and seeing certain friends here and singing certain songs; but for them the sermon is something to be endured—a boring irrelevance. They'd agree with Mark Twain who once said that if all the bored people in all the pews in all the churches of America were laid out end to end across the country, they'd be a lot more comfortable.

I think it's time for a break. Let's have a cartoon. I know that sermons all too often look a little bit like this.



I guess that some of the sermons are like that, but they ought to be more like this:



Obviously again a caricature. But if I asked you, as you leave church this morning, "When did you last learn something new about God that changed your life?" What would you say to me? Perhaps we have never thought of church as an opportunity to learn new truths (or re-learn old truths) in order for our lives to change. Do you see the two parts? Christianity must engage with our brains. And it must change our lives. Nothing else is Biblical

Christianity, nothing else is living faith. It must engage with your mind and change your life.

That's what this church service is for: the eternal truths of the gospel to come home to the here and now in your and my life this morning.

A second pattern which emerges in the chapter concerns how people get to respond to Jesus. I originally called this next section The Foundation for Faith, but as I went back over the sermon notes this morning I realised that was the wrong title. So my new title reflects what firstly I think the chapter is about.

## **(2) The Route to Faith**

Look at verse 29: *The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* Then look on to verses 35-37: *The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.* Do you see there the pattern? One person sees something and speaks about it: he saw and he said. Another person hears and follows. And then that person sees for himself, and then he too speaks about it ... and the sequence continues, through Andrew and Peter, and Philip (who is actually accosted directly by Jesus) and Nathanael.

Look on at vv 43-45: *The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip 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."* Here was the beginning of the community which now embraces a quarter of the human race. And the primary way it has spread is through one person telling another. How did we first hear? It may have been a parent, or a sibling or a school friend. But for most of us there was probably one or two main people who told us. And some of us will still remember vividly the nervous embarrassment that gripped us when we first opened our mouths, in our turn, to tell another person that Jesus Christ had become a living reality for us.

It's easy to have a false image of evangelism. It's got a very bad press: an image of huge rallies and high pressure salesmanship. But the normal way the gospel spreads is through one person telling another.

I remember, very early in my Christian life, being told an imaginary story of a man who was introduced to Jesus by a friend (as I had just been at that stage in my life) and who was then encouraged by that friend to try to introduce someone else to Jesus. This he did. It took some months, and while he was encouraging and building up the new convert in the Christian faith he met an international evangelist who invited him to join his team. The evangelist said, "I am seeing a thousand conversions a week in my ministry at the moment. Come and join us!" And the man said, "Thank you very much, but I've made a commitment to this one friend to meet regularly with him and to build him up in the faith. And we've both agreed that at the end of a year we are both going to each try separately to introduce someone else to Jesus, and spend some time trying to build that person up in the Christian faith as well."

At the end of the year the evangelist phoned him up again and again said, "Can you join my team? We really need you, we're so busy. We've seen 52,000 conversions since I last spoke to you. How many have you seen? What's going on in your life?" "Well," he said, "there's just the one friend. He's getting quite strong now and we've each resolved that we're going to try to introduce one other person to Jesus this coming year. So I'm afraid I still can't join your team, although God is so evidently blessing it."

Do you know how long it would take that evangelist to reach the world's population? When I was told this story, some time ago, apparently at that time it would have taken him 42,000 years had the population of the world stood still (which of course, it doesn't do—it's increasing by more than 1,000 per week). And the other man, introducing one friend, building him up for a year, and then both separately trying to do the same with someone else—do you know how long it would take him to reach the whole world? 34 years, apparently.

"Oh," you say, "hang on, Mark. The world's population will have doubled in 34 years." And I

guess you're probably right. In which case, I'm sad to say, it will take him 35 years. It's the difference between addition and multiplication.

But don't miss the point (and I'm not trying to teach you something about maths!): it's not the effectiveness that I want to set before you this morning, it's the Biblical pattern that is there in John chapter 1, as we read of this community that now stretches right over the globe first beginning as people just told a friend and said, "Come and see".

In no way does this pattern that's there in John 1 undermine the ministry of the great evangelists like Billy Graham. We need their work to give the rest of us the opportunities to talk one to one with our friends. They know the value of the one. The story is told of Billy Graham being interviewed on the BBC by Kenneth Allsop, before one of his early crusades in London (back in the 1950s, I guess). At the end of the interview Kenneth Allsop said, "Dr. Graham, a very great deal of money has been spent in preparing for this crusade [one of the problems English Christianity had with Billy Graham was how much money was spent on evangelism]. As far as you're concerned, Dr. Graham, how many converts will make it all worthwhile?" Billy Graham said, "Just one. Just one convert would make it all worthwhile." And looking at Kenneth Allsop he added, "Just you, Kenneth."

Well what about the Men's Breakfast on Thursday morning? Or the other opportunities we try to provide all the time—they're there around you and me.

But we can't leave this particular Biblical pattern of one person telling another without a further comment, and you will notice now why that earlier title was wrong. I thought I was going to develop something rather different under that title. I've been talking about *The Route to Faith*, but now just notice for a moment *The Foundation for Faith*, because the foundation is different. The people we read of in John 1 were all eyewitnesses of Jesus during His earthly life. They saw Him in the flesh with their physical eyes. And their testimony to Him is of a different nature from that of all those of us who have lived since. We have not seen Jesus with our own physical eyes. But the New Testament records for us that firsthand eyewitness testimony to the historical Jesus. John wrote in his

first letter: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life* (1 John 1:1). You and I cannot say that. We haven't seen Him with our eyes and looked at Him and our hands have not touched Him as theirs had. But the New Testament authors can say it. And the foundation for the Christian faith is not actually an invitation to share a friend's religious experience. It is to respond to the Biblical record of the historical Jesus. The first-hand, eyewitness testimony to Jesus in the New Testament takes priority over my personal testimony to His reality as my Saviour today.

Faith is not actually what H. L. Mencken called it: 'an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable'. It is a reasoning trust in the New Testament record, backed up by the personal testimony of our contemporaries. And so the single most helpful thing that we can do for our unbelieving friends and relations is actually getting them to read a gospel, or whatever is the appropriate way of sharing the words of the Bible with them—and then telling them that that Jesus they are reading of then has saved us, too, today.

Well we still haven't reached our passage for this week—the verses with which the chapter ends. And as we look at this last section of the chapter you will notice the patterns we have been talking about, and that the chapter ends as it began, back out into eternity again.

### **(3) Heaven Open (or From Here to Eternity)**

*The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip 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." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip* (vv 43-46).

We do not know from any other source that Nazareth had a particularly low reputation. So it may well have been more the incongruity of someone as glorious as the Messiah hailing from

somewhere as obscure as Nazareth, that Nathanael is commenting on. How could the Messiah come from anywhere as back woods as a small town in Galilee? You'll have encountered the same sentiment: how can the reality of God be wrapped up in the stupidity of the Christian religion? It's what's called the scandal of historicity: how can eternity, divinity, infinity, be packaged in space and time? It's a reasonable objection, and Philip gave the right answer: "Come and see." How could anything of relevance to me today come out of a book as old as the Bible? A reasonable objection which I was facing just the week before last from someone. How can one man's death, 2,000 years ago, affect me today? How can anything of value come out of anything as ludicrous as the Church? Well, "Come and see," said Philip (as we were singing in that new hymn).

*"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" (vv 47-49).*

It is not clear to us what Jesus meant by, *I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree*. It seems to imply that Jesus had some supernatural knowledge of the state of Nathanael's heart before God. He knew that Nathanael was a true Israelite, longing for the coming of Israel's Messiah. One who would therefore recognise that Messiah as soon as he encountered Him—which indeed he did: *Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel."* *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."* (vv 49-51).

There is a switch, that can't be conveyed by the translation, from a singular 'you' in verse 50 (you, Nathanael, believe), to a plural 'you' in verse 51 (you shall see heaven open). It was not something that Nathanael alone would see: heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the the Son of Man. It was the promise of a full understanding of who Jesus is, and what He had come to do.

The word 'open' in the verse is a perfect: it means opened and remaining opened. This is not a promise of a glimpse into eternity, it is the realisation, the revelation, that Jesus is the means of establishing communication between heaven and earth. He is the door, He is the gate, He is the way. He is the place where the two touch. It is not a case of Jesus as it were opening a door and us looking past Him into some wonderful and lovely and beautiful land beyond. We look at Him, into His eyes, and realise that we are looking God in the face. There is nothing lovelier; there is nowhere more beautiful. If we have Him, we have everything. He is the One whom the Spirit of God, this Whitsun, longs to point us to. Heaven has already poured down its fullness upon Him. And He is the One, the only One, who can take us from here (wherever we are at this moment)—from here to eternity.

A great eastern convert to the Christian faith, Sadhu Sundar Singh, was once asked by his fellow countrymen what he found in the Christian faith that he did not find in any other religion of the world. He replied in two words: "Jesus Christ."

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*