

What Does It Mean Really, to Follow Jesus?

Lenten series 2009

John 1:35-51

What does it mean really, to follow Jesus?

In other words, what is the vocation of those who belong to Christ?

In an attempt to answer this, in an attempt to explore this,

I would like to do an initial reading of a passage from the Gospel of John, chapter 1:35-51, in which we see the first five disciples called to Jesus:

John, Andrew, Simon, Phillip, and Nathaniel.

We will see how far we get!

As we will notice, it is a very *dense* passage

in which we see rather quick succession of callings which seem to flow, so to speak, until, of course, the last of these five is called, i.e. Nathaniel.

As you may recall, Nathaniel is the feisty, slightly cynical one who exclaims ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’

Yet, interestingly, when Nathaniel comes to Jesus,

Jesus says “Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.”

We will come back to this.

At any rate, in this passage, in these encounters, Jesus is *very* revealed:

- Lamb of God
- Rabbi
- Messiah (Anointed)
- Jesus
- Son of Man
- King of Israel
- Son of Man

Let’s begin reading...

Verse 35: “The next day John was there again with two of his disciples”.

John the Evangelist, in straightforward, somewhat flat fashion, states that these encounters occur “the next day”.

In verse 29, we have the first “next day”.

Here in verse 35 is a “next day”.

And in verse 43 we have another “next day”.

We have a very unusual succession in time, that may not be simply days...

After his great testimony to Jesus as the “Lamb of God”,
and as what is articulated in the prologue, “Son of God”,
John the Baptist was “there again” with two of his disciples.
Where?

He is presumably not far from the Jordan where he was baptized.

Verse 36: “And as he watched, Jesus walked by.”

Jesus *walks by* John the Baptist. Why does Jesus not stop?

I might have expected to yell “Hey J.B. What’s up?”

Awesome job you’re doing. Thanks again. Keep up the good work.”

The nature of the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist
is, in fact, underscored.

It is a mysterious relationship of great closeness,

but in great silence and in great interior poverty.

In other words John the Baptist is in the desert,

and in a certain state of aloneness and his intimacy with Jesus is very hidden.

They are not drinking or golfing buddies!

Jesus draws John the Baptist to himself at a very deep, subtle level,

beyond words, and the ordinary benefits of friendship are not manifest.

John the Baptist knows this in faith

and accepts not to have what one would normally have in friendship.

As John the Baptist so eloquently and poignantly states,

in his final testimony to Jesus in Chapter 3,

he is but the best man who rejoices at the bridegrooms voice.

In other words, it is John the Baptist’s joy to witness Jesus

engage *others* as his bride.

Talk about selflessness. Talk about poverty of spirit.

Here we see John the Baptist simply being the best man.

Jesus walks by and John the Baptist stays in the desert.

I would have run to Jesus and screamed “It’s about time I get to come.”

Instead, John the Baptist had discovered and had seen the lamb

and knew in his heart that his place was in the desert.

Recall that, the day before, Jesus had come to John the Baptist, alone.

And apparently, that encounter was enough for John the Baptist,

to satisfy his heart, and to reassure him of his mission in the desert.

“John was *there again*.”

Supposedly, the terms used to describe John the Baptist “there”, standing, “rooted” in the desert are the same Greek terms used to describe Mary standing, “rooted” at the foot of the cross. (John 19:25)

In fact, it makes for an interesting parallel: two witnesses of the Lamb. John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and Mary at the end of Jesus’ ministry (Mary, of course, witnessing the lamb slain, i.e. on the cross). What inner strength John the Baptist had to remain in the desert. What *love* John the Baptist had to remain in the desert. True selflessness comes from love.

This day, after having come to John the Baptist alone the day before, Jesus comes again, not *towards* John the Baptist, however, but *by* John the Baptist.

It is a different encounter, a “passing” encounter. This encounter is with John the Baptist as *master*, master of those he is preparing for Jesus, for the Messiah. John the Baptist had disciples. John the Baptist had disciples, but surely not as a result of a recruitment campaign. No advertisement. No clever slogans. No promises of anything. Sheer attraction. John the Baptist was surely minding his own business and his business was Jesus. John the Baptist simply attracts to the desert, and, as we see here, *stays* in the desert.

We know not what John the Baptist said to his disciples after his one-on-one with Jesus the day before. We know not even how many disciples he had. Presumably these two are it.

“As he watched Jesus walk by he said ‘Behold the Lamb of God’”.

John the Baptist *watches* Jesus as he walks by. The contemplative gaze of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is seized by the Lamb. He once again is given the grace of experiencing the lamb, But, as is always the case with grace, it is *new*. It is an *other* experience. He then again declares, yet anew, “Behold the Lamb of God”.

This is the beginning of Jesus' apostolic life,
 although not explicitly a ministerial act.
 (His first ministerial act at the wedding feast at Cana
 immediately follows the call of these first disciples.)
 John the Baptist points to the Lamb
 And, without hesitation, his two disciples follow.
 They do not say a word. And John the Baptist does not say a word.
 If I were John the Baptist, I probably would have said,
 "Hey, what about 'good-bye'? How about thank you?
 I've been feeding you, teaching you, and preparing you for this guy.
 A little gratitude is all I ask. What ever happen to manners?"

Interestingly, Jesus does not make these two disciples say "Thank you."
 They follow immediately. Why?
 Precisely because they have been well prepared.
 And there is probably an understanding with their master John the Baptist
 and there is great trust.
 John the Baptist says nothing,
 not because he is polite but because he is poor in spirit.
 He in fact rejoices because he witnesses the Bridegroom engaging his Bride.
 A disciple is betrothed to Christ.

Jesus lets them follow him without hesitation, and, in that,

- expresses his great trust in John the Baptist
- expresses the fact that He does not come as the "big boss".

It is really quite amazing.
 One could have expected Jesus to start from scratch.
 He was (and is), after all, *renewing* everything.
 There had never been and will never again be a religious leader
 who was God-man; that means *newness* (!).
 Instead, Jesus accepts these two fellows already disciples of some one else.
 How magnanimous Jesus is.
 He integrates into his work the input of others.
 John the Baptist had prepared them well, however,
 because of his poverty of spirit.
 Because of his poverty of spirit,
God could prepare these disciples through John the Baptist.

Jesus' taking of John the Baptist's disciples manifests that

- there is a certain continuity between the Old and New covenants
- Jesus comes to serve and not to run his own show

Verse 37: “The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus.”

Upon hearing “Behold the lamb of God”

the two disciples immediately follow.

The moment we hear “Behold the lamb of God” we ought to follow.

This is what happens when we really follow Jesus.

This is the first moment of the vocation of those who belong to Christ.

We discover the Lamb, thanks to someone like John the Baptist,

thanks to someone who mediates and points the way,

and we begin to follow.

If such is the case, then our vocation begins with great trust.

To follow means not always to see the face of the one we follow.

We can trust Jesus, however, because we know, in faith,

that He is the Lamb, and the lamb means loving mercy.

Verse 38: “Jesus turned and saw them following him.”

The second moment: the gaze of Jesus.

Even though we follow Jesus, he *does* turn to look at us.

Jesus' eyes do meet our eyes.

And in his eyes, we see an infinity of goodness.

And as we gaze into his eyes, he poses a question.

Jesus poses a deliberate, pointed question. “What are you seeking?”

Jesus searches their hearts, their desires.

And he asks that they express, that they articulate them.

It is significant that Jesus question.

A question leaves a person free.

Jesus respects our hearts; he never forces anything.

Love can never be forced.

In fact, we witness how Jesus favors love,

for in questioning, he awakens desire and desire intensifies love.

Verse 30: “They said to him ‘Rabbi, (which translated means teacher) where are you staying?’”

Apparently, Jesus succeeded in awakening desire.
 John and Andrew dare to ask Jesus where he is staying.
 It is rather bold. It is not normally what one asks a master.
 You would probably not ask a visiting bishop or the Dali Lama
 —as your first question, “Where are you staying?”

The question is not about location.
 John and Andrew are not curious
 in whose home or at which inn Jesus is literally staying.
 They express thirst to know Jesus and thirst to experience Jesus.
 John the Baptist was in deed a good master to them,
 he who thirsted, he who trusted.

Their simplicity and their focus translate love.
 Bargaining, or secondary questions,
 would have signaled something less than love;
 perhaps curiosity, but not love.

How wonderfully this encounter manifests
 the heart, or the essence, of the vocation of those who belong to Jesus.
 The Christian life is a loving bond with a person.
 It is not first the question of doctrine, moral guidelines, or model behavior.
 John and Andrew interestingly, ask nothing about Jesus’ teaching
 —even if they do address him as “Rabbi”, the Teacher.
 Love is primary in our lives as Christians.
 Teaching, dogma—whatever you want to call it,
 is important, but *secondary*.

Verse 39: “He said to them Come and you will see”

Jesus invited them to stay with him.
 “Where are you staying?” “Stay with me!”
 We see simplicity and trust in both directions.
 How refreshing: no suspicion, no conditions.
 “Come and you will see.”
 In other words, to enter into relationship with Jesus,
 one must experience Jesus.

How important this is for us to understand
 especially in our world where we so easily think
 that such experience can be replaced.
 For example: *Facebook* friends whom we have never met.
 Are we in real relationship with them?
 The experience is rather thin.
 Is not the relationship rather thin?
 Relationship requires direct experience.
 Mediated experience is insufficient.
 To be in relationship with Jesus, we must experience Jesus.
 We must “go and stay”.

**Verse 39: (continued) “So they went and saw where he was staying.
 They stayed with him that day. It was about 4 in the after noon.”**

They *stayed*. How wonderful.
 How intimate and refreshing and intriguing, yet simple it must have been.
 And John notes what may seem superfluous.
 “It was about 4 in the afternoon.” Who cares?
 Actually, don’t you *love* it?
 I love when I see “detail oriented” on a resume.
 The detail serves to underscore that it was a *real* experience.

**Verse 40: “Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who
 heard John”**

John is so real. And John is so discreet, and, in a sense, hidden.
 He was so wonderfully discovered Jesus
 that he chooses to be entirely relative to Jesus in love.
 He does not boast or brag. He does not even name himself!
 Instead, John highlights Andrew—which he does well,
 if anything, because his brother is Simon Peter—a big catch!

It is interesting how John underscores, in highlighting Andrew,
 the importance of John the Baptist’s words, John the Baptist’s testimony:
 “One of the two who *heard* John”.
 Why is it so important? Perhaps because John the Baptist’s testimony
 is the ultimate testimony of the Old Covenant,
 and serves as a hinge to the New Covenant.

**Verse 41: He first found his own brother Simon and told him ,
“We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed).**

“First” in this text supposedly refers to early morning.
It does not refer to Andrew finding someone else after Simon Peter.
Early morning: how could Andrew not be up early?
After encountering the Messiah,
 what a night he must have spent, his heart bursting.
He finds Simon and shares the good news, his great discovery.
And, in sharing, he declares himself a disciple:
 “The Messiah”, i.e. *my* Messiah.
Following Jesus means first encountering a friend,
 but a friend to whom we witness.
Following Jesus thus means also being a disciple.

Interestingly, to Simon, Andrew does not say
“We have found the Lamb of God”.
Simon was probably not in a place to “get it”.
Messiah is more accessible.
Lamb requires a more contemplative gaze.

Verse 42: “Then he brought him to Jesus.”

Andrew does not stop at sharing the good news,
but he grabs hold of Simon and takes him to Jesus.
Peter was rough on the edges. He needed a helping hand.
All John the Baptist had to do in his mediation was
fix his eyes on Jesus and say “Behold”.
A more contemplative witness sufficed for John and Andrew.
Simon needs a kick in the, as we say in French, *derriere*.

**Verse 42: (continued): “Jesus looked at him and said “you are Simon,
son of John. You will be called Kephaz (which is translated Peter)”.**

Jesus looked at him. It is not just a detail. Jesus’ gaze is not just a detail.
In fact, can we not say Jesus’ gaze is more than any discourse?

And while gazing upon Simon Jesus changes his name. How amazing!
 Jesus' gaze is *definitely* not a detail.
 It penetrates to the heart of who we are.
 Jesus has a particular intention with respect to Simon.
 He is to be a rock for his brethren—by grace (not by personality!)

Verse 43: “The next day they decided to go to Galilee and they found Phillip and Jesus said to him “Follow me.””

Jesus goes to Galilee where he finds Phillip.
 Now, notice how each encounter is unique.
 Each of us encounters Jesus uniquely.
 My encounter is not your encounter.
 My experience is not your experience.
 My relationship is not your relationship.

- John and Andrew follow Jesus as he walks by, and in that movement, Jesus turns, looks at them, probes their hearts and invites them to stay with him
- Peter gets dragged by his sibling, experiences Jesus' gaze and receives a new name
- Jesus goes directly to Phillip (the first without intermediary), and says “Follow me—boom: end of story. Jesus, of course, can only say “Follow me”, if there is a communication of love. Otherwise, the response would be “Excuse me?” or “Not happening without explanation.”

Verse 44: “Now Phillip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter.

John specifies that Phillip is from Bethsaida which might give the impression that Jesus is deliberately choosing all same home-town boys.
 It is important to know that Jesus' choices are never determined by exterior circumstance.
 Jesus' choices originate entirely in himself.
 They are choices of love, and he is love.
 Details of time and place show that Jesus, in his choices of love, embraces all that we are, the stuff of our lives.

Verse 45: “Phillip found Nathaniel and told him “We have found one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus, Son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”

We now come to Nathaniel.

As said earlier, everything flows until this fifth encounter.

Jesus is conquering hearts effortlessly.

Nathaniel, however, is another pack of gum.

Finally some gumption (gum-ption)! Finally a little resistance!

Finally someone is asking for some explanation

from this “Jesus” who is blowing through town collecting disciples.

Indeed, Nathaniel is a more intellectual type.

Notice what Phillip says to him

“We have found one about whom Moses wrote in the law,

and also the prophets, Jesus, Son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”

Phillip knows his listener and seeks to make it intellectually palatable.

It is not the spontaneous simplicity of Andrew to Simon.

Phillip’s attempt fails however.

Verse 46: Nathaniel said to him “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

If only we could hear Nathanael’s tone of voice.

It must have been priceless—and revealing.

Nathaniel uses irony—perhaps to distract from the fact of his tardiness
in the discovery in the Messiah.

He was not the first. And “brains” like to be the first to discover.

His response is much like “Whatever”, which we use to downplay things.

Phillip then realizes that discussion is futile.

“Philip said to him “Come and see”.”

Once again it is about experiencing the person of Jesus.

Nathaniel, interestingly, accepts.

**Verse 47: “Jesus say Nathaniel coming toward him and said of him
“Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.”**

Jesus is one step ahead.

Notice how he anticipates Nathaniel’s arrival.

And notice how it is as though Jesus comes to Phillips rescue
and his inability to articulate things convincingly to Nathaniel.

Jesus comes to our rescue when we do not know
what to say or do in testimony to him.

Jesus does something surprising.

Loudly, in front of everyone, he declares Nathaniel a true Israelite.

We go from silent gaze to public declaration. Go figure!

Each encounter is unique...

Jesus meets Nathaniel on his turf, i.e. more intellectually,
accepting that Nathaniel’s welcome of Jesus is less perfect, requiring a sign.

**Verse 48: “Nathaniel said to him “How do you know me?:” Jesus
answered and said to him “Before Phillip called you I saw you under the
fig tree.”**

Jesus wants to take Nathaniel’s critical mind and make it contemplative,
i.e. open it to the mystery of God, beyond what he “gets”.

The final verses of this encounter manifest this amazingly.

**Verse 49-51: “Nathaniel answered him “Rabbi, you are the son of God,
the King of Israel.” Jesus answered and said to him “Do you believe
because I said I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things
than this.” And he said to him “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see
the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the
Son of Man.”**

And so, in these five encounters,

we see how Jesus has us discover him differently.

He is too rich to be captured in a single encounter, in a single aspect.

Jesus has us walk different paths of discovery.

Jesus is Lamb of God, Messiah, Jesus, Son of God, King of Israel, Son of Man.

- Lamb: Jesus comes vulnerable in love, in silence.
- Messiah: Jesus comes sent by the Father to share the Father
- Jesus: “God saves”, Jesus comes to save
- Son of God: Jesus comes to introduce into the life of the Trinity
- King of Israel: Jesus comes with authority
- Son of Man: Jesus comes to serve

These aspects of Jesus and what occurs in these encounters reveal dimensions of our life with him, of the Christian life.

- John and Andrew encountering the lamb reveals Christian life is a *loving bond* in the silence of the heart with Jesus who floods us with mercy.
- Andrew finding Simon and witnessing to the Messiah reveals that the Christian life makes of us, *de facto*, necessarily, *witnesses* to him.
- Simon being named “rock” (Peter) for his brethren reveals that the Christian life makes of us *servants* of one another.
One of the titles of the pope is “Servant of service.”
- Jesus finding Phillip who immediately follows reveals that the Christian life entails spontaneity, *gratuitousness*, i.e. living without calculation.
- Jesus encountering Nathaniel, who must offer his intellect to Jesus if he is to enter into relationship with Jesus reveals that in the Christian life we yield in love, we offer our intellect, so to be drawn into something *contemplative*.