**Sunday 15 January**

**Epiphany 2**

Sermon Sharing what you have seen...

# Let me start with our reading from Isaiah, where God’s call is spelled out as needing to be more than simply saving the ones who are already in the family of God...

*God said: It is not enough for you to be my servant and revive the tribes of Jacob, and bring home the survivors of Israel. I shall make you a light for all nations, so that my liberation and healing may reach the remotest places on earth. (Isaiah 49:6)*

God’s call was really big. Now you may read that and go, phew, glad I’m not Isaiah –glad my call isn’t that big...

But I suspect you kind of know what’s coming next... yes, there are some big people with big calls –like Tutu or Tyndale, Bach or Wesley, Wilberforce or Nightingale...

But are their calls really any different to ours?

So yes, I’m saying that we too are part of this big calling.

But what I want you to also notice in Isaiah, is that with God’s call, also comes God’s equipping. For Isaiah, it is this kind of equipping -

*He made my mouth as sharp as a sword,*

*he worked secretly with me in the shade of his hand,*

*He fashioned me into a smooth arrow and concealed me in his quiver.*

So we are not called without also the opportunity to be equipped.

Now notice the way I said that - the opportunity to be equipped –because I don’t believe that for most of us God calls us and then magically we wake up with all the skills we need for the task... No, what we do get is the opportunities for us to be equipped... Opportunities of experience, of training, of learning... that we need to make the most of.

Likewise Jesus was equipped –through years of preparation... at age 12 he is seeking understanding at the temple, full of questions. Then there are the hidden years until his late 20s which we know nothing of... perhaps he was a carpenter like his dad, perhaps an elder at the local synagogue, perhaps he travelled... whatever he did though would have been a time of equipping.

But we also learn from Isaiah that being equipped doesn’t mean things will be easy or that everything will turn out as we wanted. Isaiah says -

*But I said:     “All my efforts have been useless,*

*I have exhausted myself for nothing but hot air.*

*Yet I thought my cause was God’s,*

*and that God would give me some success.”*

Isaiah felt like he had done all he could –doing what he believed he was called by God to do... and it had come to nothing... So we cannot assume that everything we do will see the fruit we seek. Disappointment will happen. But that doesn’t mean we don’t do anything. It doesn’t mean we stop doing what we are called and equipped to do. And while Isaiah thought he hadn’t achieved anything –his words would be used hundreds of years later in a far bigger plan. His understanding of a servant messiah –a man of sorrows- rather than a conquering hero would help the people understand Jesus.

And another point to note from the Isaiah passage is that the reward for Isaiah’s efforts that seemed to achieve nothing –was increased responsibility. -An even bigger task.

Isaiah was to broaden his vision further. This was another glimpse of Epiphany.

The Light was not just for Israel –it was for the whole world. The Hebrew people did not really comprehend the vastness of this and continued to see themselves as the chosen people –but it is there –this Epiphany –this revelation of God bringing Light for all the world. Sitting comfortably as one of the chosen was not good enough. The call is to share the light. Just as the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple said in the early 1900s -

*“The church is the only organisation which exists entirely for non-members.”*

A comfortable church in which we care for one another is not good enough. We are here to bring Light beyond ourselves. The big task -to expand the circle of Light. Whether we feel like we are achieving what we are called to do or not, God is calling us to the bigger task bryond what we know.

To paraphrase the text from Isaiah:

*God said: It is not enough for you Christians to be my servants and revive the church, and bring back the backsliders. I shall make you a light for all nations, so that my liberation and healing may reach the remotest places on earth.*

And so we turn to our gospel reading from John 1.

If you know the gospel of John very well at all, you probably can recall something of what has already been said –I had to learn the beginning of John 1 in Greek when I was studying so it is pretty familiar... –remember it? *-In the beginning was the word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God...*

And then it goes on to introduce the idea of the Light... *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

And then we are introduced to John –no birth narrative of Jesus in this gospel –not even his baptism -we go straight into his adult ministry... and introduced in terms of Light -

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.*

The gospel then goes on to clarify that John was not the Messiah but the one preparing the way... and it is made clear that this is all happening on *the other side of the Jordan* –a reference back to the Hebrew people crossing the Jordan with Joshua –their arrival into the promised land. Jesus is already being referred to as the new Israel.

And then we get to today’s passage, where John sees Jesus coming down the road and says Look –the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And then he gives a testimony... he says

*“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.****33****And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’****34****I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”*

This is how we hear about Jesus’ baptism in this gospel. -Through the giving of a testimony –the simple sharing by John of what he had seen of Jesus. That is the testimony we are all called to. That is what we do in our God at Work slot –we share the way we have seen God working in our lives. Here, John is saying what he saw Jesus do.

And if we read on we see that the next day John sees Jesus again and says the same thing to his disciples... Look, the Lamb of God. And these disciples of John went and spent time with Jesus. One of those disciples was Simon Peter’s brother Andrew... who recalls this moment so clearly it is even noted that it happened at 4 o’clock... one of those moments of meeting Jesus that is so clearly remembered as a moment in time. And Andrew then went to tell his brother Simon about Jesus and introduce him. He was no longer a disciple of John, but of Jesus.

Within a few verses, we see an amazing amount of things happening –life changing events.

And it begins when John the Baptist calls Jesus “the Lamb of God” –and repeats it the next day. It’s a strange phrase, if you stop and think about it. For most of us it is so familiar in Christian tradition that it does not surprise us. But for an outsider, it must sound odd. Somehow the old image of Jesus as a woolly sheep with a gentle face, and the base of a cross held between its front feet, or lying across its shoulder seems even more peculiar.

-Perhaps because here in NZ we see sheep as pretty stupid creatures, following one another across paddocks or into trouble. When driving along a country road and we encounter a herd, we proceed extra carefully, knowing that one could easily dart off and the others will follow. Sheep appear to be over-endowed with the herd instinct, and do not seem to have the brains to stop even when the leader gets into trouble.

So it can be difficult to fit this image with Jesus...

Was Jesus a follower... governed by the herd instinct? Not able to think for himself?

Not at all! Jesus defied the pressure from the “herd” and its leaders. He broke new ground, opened up new paths.

And yet this image is there in the gospel and there in the tradition of the church since its earliest day so we cannot simply put it aside. We have a responsibility to take this passage seriously and try to understand what is being meant by John when he talks about Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Even though its meaning is not all that clear. We assume John used the term in a way the Jews listening to him would have understood, so we go back to the Old Testament to look for clues of understanding. And we find a few possibilities -

Firstly, there is the story of Abraham, willing to offer his son as a sacrifice in obedience to God, who is forestalled by God providing a ram instead. Not a sin offering in this case. And not a lamb.

Secondly, there were thousands of lambs killed, and eaten, by Jewish families at the Passover Festival each year. This was a commemoration of the liberation of the Jews from slavery. But it was not in any way an offering to atone for sin.

Thirdly, there was the once-a-year Day of Atonement, when a beast was driven into the wilderness, symbolically bearing the sins of the people on its shoulders. But this was not a lamb but a goat. Hence the phrase which is still used: “a scapegoat.”

And finally, the most likely connection is in the famous 53rd chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah, who wrote -

*He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*

*Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows.*

*But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.*

*Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. Like a lamb that is lead to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers his dumb, so he opened not his mouth.*

That this Scripture was in the mind of John seems possible, mainly because Jesus himself closely identified with the writings of Isaiah.

But remember John’s comment is well before any of Jesus’ teaching... this is the very beginning of such an understanding –which makes me wonder how much John and Jesus had shared about who Jesus was. Later a lot would be put together around words like atonement –the way Christ bore the sins of the world as he suffered on the cross -but here is the beginning of such understanding. John was grasping something of the way perfect love would overcome evil. Something of the way Jesus could free people from their sins –and would carry the sins of others on his own shoulders. This was God at work, in Christ. It was not Jesus acting to change the mind of God –it was the expression of God’s mind.

So although Lamb of God may seem like a strange term to us kiwis, and may be a problem for scholars trying to track down its origins in the OT, for us Christians, it is a statement of redemption –a reminder that at the cross, God bore the sins of the world –and so the cross has been transformed from a sign of extermination and murder to a sign of ultimate love for all people.

And it calls us forward to that age old Epiphany challenge –to share the Light of Christ with the world. Giving testimony –sharing what we have seen of Jesus. Beyond this room of people. Telling what we know to be true –what we have experienced of God in our lives –sharing the Light of Christ in whatever ways we can.

That is the Epiphany challenge, so be it, Amen.