

## Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2015 AM Close encounters of the first kind – John 1v29-51

### **Title: Close encounters of the first kind – John 1v29-51**

**Purpose:** To learn lessons we can learn from three people who have “Close encounters of the first kind!”

## **INTRODUCTION**

### Test driving the Christian faith

Recently, as some of you may know, my son David had, at short notice, to find himself a new car and so we ended up at a garage in Cheltenham looking at 3 cars each of which were possible contenders.

But when you're about to invest quite a large slice of your savings in a car OR in anything else you really need to be sure that you have the right thing.

And so for us we weren't there just to peer through the windows and read the specifications of the car, though those things were important – \*NO\* what we really needed to do was get in the car and give it a good test drive.

### This morning

This morning and for a number of weeks we are going to be going through various passages in John's gospel and we are going to be selecting the passages where people have an ENCOUNTER with Jesus.

And it is in this way that we watch as people test drive the faith before they yield up the downpayment of the rest of their lives.

### Encounters

We will be sitting, as it were, in the back seat of the car watching what happens to people:

- how they react, how they are changed
- we see how Jesus behaves, what he says, what he does
- we see the longer term changes in the people over the 21 chapters of the book (though we won't be covering every single chapter)

Today we have a small cluster of encounters – we have one teacher and a couple of students.

So first off we're going to be joining John the Baptist to observe his encounter and reaction to Jesus:

## **1. John the Baptist**

Now regarding the earlier half of this first chapter of John's gospel, it is apparent that John the Baptist was busy as a teacher and busy as a baptiser.

His words and activity was causing no small stir and because of this people were flocking to hear him and to be baptised with water as a sign of their repentance over their sin.

I did \*not\* know Him/would \*not\* have known Him

And coming to our section of the chapter from **Verse 29 onwards** we find a couple of very clear and also surprising statements:

**Verse 31** we hear John the Baptist saying: “**I myself did \*not\* know him**, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

and then in **Verse 34** he goes on to say:

(Verse 34) “**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.’”

It seems apparent that John has crossed a threshold from **\*NOT\*** knowing to **KNOWING** and if you ask – so when did John get to finally “know” Jesus, the answer is that this happened when Jesus himself was baptised. As John was baptising him, the Spirit of God came down like a dove and remained on him and this was the sign.

What this tells us about Jesus was that he was, in the flesh, unremarkable.

I would imagine that most of us, at some point have seen one or more of those Jesus films, you know the ones they tend to put on at Easter time. This is where you have a very handsome bearded actor who plays Jesus and has those kinds of incredible eyes that instantly make him look slightly supernatural.

If you look at the OT you realise that this was actually prophesied about him:

**Isaiah 53 Verse 2** “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. **He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.**”

So there is **NOTHING AUTOMATIC** about coming to know Jesus – it is something that God Himself brings about through Him opening someones eyes to behold the Divine Jesus.

It is not that John did not see a man whose name according to his humanity was Jesus – it is just that he would not have seen anymore than that **UNAIDED BY GOD**.

### A major difference between Christianity and other religions

Right here is a point of distinction between Christianity and all other religions.

In all religions that posit some notion of a god or gods, they have in common that, at the end of the day, you must take steps, or follow some sort of “spiritual” procedures to locate, or to please, or access your deity. You are the one that must **DO** something.

Christianity is quite unique in its starting point that you actually **CANNOT DO ANYTHING** – you are truly helpless until helped. Christ must come and open your eyes.

If you ask, why should we be so **HELPLESS** – then the answer is simply the **FALL** of mankind under Adam and Eve. God did say that mankind would die and by that he did **\*not\*** mean “drop dead on the spot” – instead he meant that our spiritual faculties would be rendered useless, inoperative and lifeless.

The only solution to our spiritual fallenness inherited from Adam is that God comes, through the working of His Holy

Spirit and spiritually breathes fresh life into us so that we might have our eyes open to truly behold Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John the Baptist is letting us see that reality – because he says “I wouldn’t have known unless I was told...’The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is He who will baptise with the Holy Spirit”.

### TO DEFLECT – TO DIMINISH

If you try and put yourself in John’s shoes for a moment it can really help to highlight something very powerful about him.

He was at the highest moment of his life. Crowds were flocking to hear him, coming from miles and miles around to hear him and to also respond to his message – they were getting baptised.

He had a very fruitful ministry going – so much so that even the Pharisees and the Priests were coming out to see what was going on and to find out who he was.

And now he has an encounter with Jesus and he is the one chosen to personally baptise Jesus, the Son of God. In doing this he gets to witness the Spirit descending like a dove and settling on him and to hear the voice of God almighty saying

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.”

And then we see this dramatic alteration in John’s life – in a much stronger and definite way John **DEFLECTS attention** from himself.

John now becomes a SIGN BOARD saying “**LOOK, THE LAMB OF GOD**” (You see that twice there in Verse 29 and then again in Verse 36).

### Self-forgetfulness

What I am saying is that one effect of encountering the true Jesus is that we are happy to play second fiddle when once we used to play first fiddle.

We are happy to diminish and for Jesus to take centre stage.

One result of truly encountering Jesus is that you might say **we gain a level of SELF-FORGETFULNESS:**

“It is not that we think less of ourselves but we think of ourselves less.”

John for the rest of his days is DIMINISHING himself, he is becoming practiced in the art of DEFLECTION taking opportunities point to the true SAVIOUR (or LAMB OF GOD) and the true TEACHER.

This is what the gospel does to you – it turns you from being a GLORY RECEIVER to being a GLORY TRANSMITTER – you stop taking credit and attracting attention to yourself and instead you help people to pay attention to Jesus.

Q. Have you got a problem with being an attention seeker?

Then observe well the accelerated change in John the Baptist – all the more he is saying (John 3 verse 30) “He must become greater; I must become less.”.

John understands that if he is too prominent he will only serve to **DILUTE** the presence and impact of Jesus in other people's lives.

Let's move on now to look at Andrew:

## 2. Andrew

For Andrew – his mentor, his rabbi had previous been John the Baptist. In those days they didn't exactly have universities but instead people would attach themselves to a tutor, to a rabbi.

And now John the Baptist is encouraging his disciples to detach and re-attach to a different and a greater Teacher.

**Verse 40** tells us: "Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said **and who had followed Jesus.**"

Andrew, along with the other former disciple of John the Baptist who remains unknown (but was probably John the writer of this 4<sup>th</sup> gospel who was the brother of James) – they both FOLLOW JESUS and JESUS gives them even more than they might have expected – Jesus grants them a one-to-one session for that day.

### Jesus always give you more

And that is a principle that you will find again and again that Jesus always gives you more.

If you take up the invitation to FOLLOW Jesus, and that is not really a foregone conclusion that anyone will do that – many do get plenty of OPPORTUNITIES but don't really ever convert those opportunities into action on their part.

If you do choose to follow, to seek out Jesus – THEN you will discover that Jesus actually gives you a lot more than you tend to expect.

### Come and see

The two disciples seem to be very polite with regard to Jesus, they start by simply following Jesus (it may be they are a bit shy of how to proceed). Then Jesus turns and says "What do you seek?".

This is such a good question – I have learned pastorally over time that it is always a good question to ask, something along the lines of: "How do you think I can help you."

They respond very politely: "Where are you staying?" which may well be their way of saying: "If it isn't convenient right now we can call by at another time if we know where to find you."

And then Jesus cuts to the chase and utters those wonderful words of invitation: "Come and see".

### A principle

It is important that we notice a principle here and that is that Jesus wants disciples, those who will truly serve him with all their hearts and minds, HOWEVER – the point is that THERE IS DUE PROCESS before that will typically be the case.

Jesus does not look to people for BLIND DUTY instead he looks for INTELLIGENT DELIGHT.

Q. What do I mean? Well simply that no-one builds anything of any size without a foundation and true faith needs a

true foundation.

The stage of CURIOSITY and ENQUIRY and DISCOVERY must never be short-circuited.

Q. What happens if it is? Well the parable of the sower puts it well when we see the seed sown on the rocky soil where the plant has no depth of soil – when the sun comes out, the plant which initially rejoiced at the gospel quickly fade and dies off.

Bill Hull, in his book “Jesus Christ – Disciple Maker” analyses how Jesus makes disciples and he breaks up his book into 4 pieces with the headings:

- SECTION 1 – “Come and See”
- SECTION 2 – “Come and follow me”
- SECTION 3 – “Come and be with me”
- SECTION 4 – “You will remain in me”

And although every stage is important, the order of the stages is crucial and the very first one is vital. We need to let people have the time and space to simply satisfy their curiosity without any undue pressure being put on them.

Hopefully our church provides a good environment where people can ask all their deepest and perhaps their most embarrassing questions without feeling anyone is going to look at them askance because they asked a really “dumb or obvious question”.

In my experience, the questions that seekers ask are often some of the best questions.

### Back to Andrew

So let’s turn our focus back to Andrew and see what we learn of him.

It is interesting that Andrew is definitely, just like his previous mentor John the Baptist, a second fiddle player par excellence. Andrew seems to have learned the lesson and gained that great skill of DEFLECTION.

There are only 3 occasions in the gospels where we have the camera actually focussing on Andrew – and all of the 3 occasions are in John’s gospel. And what is fascinating is that in every case Andrew is doing the same thing.

Q. What is that thing?

Well it is in taking somebody, in pointing somebody – to Jesus and away from himself:

- Occasion 1 – is right here in John 1 where Andrew is going to get Simon and lead him to Jesus
- Occasion 2 – is that moment when Jesus is testing his disciples, at the feeding of the 5,000, as to what they are going to do in order to feed everyone. Andrew is the one who steps up to the mark:

we read (John 6 verses 8-9) “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’”

- Occasion 3 – is John 12 when some Greeks come to Philip and request to see Jesus, Philip goes to Andrew and Andrew goes and tells Jesus.

## Andrew not simply introverted

Now I think it would **\*not\*** be right to say that Andrew was simply the somewhat **INTROVERTED BROTHER who was always in the shadow of his much more outspoken brother Simon Peter** – no, I think it was simply that Andrew delighted in getting out of the way to allow Jesus to have the stage.

Imagine I had booked to speak this morning **John Piper OR Don Carson OR Tim Keller** – (any great contemporary speaker) – **HOWEVER** in introducing the august speaker, I just went on and on – I am quite certain you would all be wishing that I would just “put a sock in it” and let the main act come on!

Andrew is exactly like that – he knows that he is not the attraction AND that there definitely is an attraction.

## His search is over AND YET just begun

It is worth seeing that for Andrew, in one day, his search is over AND YET still just begun.

See Verse 41 it says: “**The first thing** Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have **found the Messiah**’ (that is the **Christ**).”

The Scripture principle, (and this is one that Jesus gave us in the Sermon on the Mount), is that **SEEK** and you shall **FIND**.

It is very simple and it is very true, and for Andrew, that discovery happened within the space of a single day.

**Andrew had** that initial tip-off from John the Baptist **ALSO** he would have still had those words of John ringing in his ears: Verse 29 “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

**However**, now he has a personal, first-hand testimony of his own.

Q. So what is the first thing that he does?

He immediately tells someone else and that someone else is his brother and partner in the fishing business Simon.

He does exactly what John the Baptist had done:

- **FIRST** - he **gives out an invitation &**
- **SECOND** - he **backs it up with a personal testimony** and it is a pretty striking testimony don’t you think:

“We have found the Messiah!” – no sense of equivocation or uncertainty there.

Andrew **DELIGHTS** to simply bring people and connect them up with Jesus – it is a pretty simple gifting – I guess if this was a **WEDDING SETTING** – then Andrew would have the role of an **USHER**.

Ok let’s head onto the last encounter and this is the one that gains the most verses and thus has the most attention paid to it.

## **3. Nathanael**

The first thing we see, reading on from Verse 43, is that the chain of invitation to Jesus is not limited to the likes of just John the Baptist and Andrew.

Jesus himself is also directly inviting people to come to him and to follow him. Jesus does this with Philip and Philip proceeds to do it with Nathanael.

Just in case you are confused about this disciple called Nathanael – let me just say that all the signs across the 4 gospels indicate that he was also known by the name Bartholomew. In the first 3 gospels Bartholomew is listed alongside Philip and that same connection is preserved here too in John.

Another reason that this makes some sense is that Bartholomew is **primarily a Surname** – so if you translate the Aramaic Bartholomew you would get “Son of Tolmai, or Talmai or in more Graeco-Roman times Son of Ptolomy” (Bar means Son of”).

Remember what Jesus said to Simon one time after his great confession of faith (Matt 16v17) he says: “Blessed are you Simon, Son of Jonah..” which is literally in the Greek Simon BarJonah.

Now as Verse 43 says, Jesus was heading out of the South of Israel and heading back up North to Galilee and he seems to be gathering together others that already live in that area and would themselves be travelling in that very same direction.

Andrew and Simon and Philip all came from Bethsaida which was on the shores of the sea of Galilee – and Nathanael, who we are going to look at, (as John 21 Verse 2 tells us) came from Cana in Galilee. It is just possible that the wedding invite that came to Jesus and his disciples might have come via Nathanael.

Again the invite to Nathanael is remarkably similar to the one that Andrew gave to his brother Simon:

Verse 45-47 reads: “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.

Now if I was to ask you: Q. So, who was the DOUBTING DISCIPLE? You would probably answer THOMAS, and of course you would be right.

HOWEVER:

- if **Thomas** was the **DOUBTING DISCIPLE**
- then **Nathanael** was the **DISMISSIVE DISCIPLE**

We should try and imagine Nathanael looking down his nose and rolling his eyes as he says:

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”

And it maybe this morning that if we were to attach a DESCRIPTOR to each of the people we’ve been looking at:

- if we said of JOHN THE BAPIST – that he was a DEFLECTOR – pointing away to Jesus
- if we said of ANDREW – that he was an ATTRACTOR – bringing people to Jesus
- then of Nathanael – we would have to say that he was one who was simply DISMISSIVE of it all right up front

I think looking at all of them there various TRAITS are all very much immediate and up-front.

And so: Q. Which best describes you?

An awful lot of people in this country, on the OUTSIDE, are exactly like Nathanael.

As soon as you mention Christianity, they yawn and say: “Done that, been there, got the T-shirt!!” – there is that initial YET superficial rejection.

Nathanael still goes

Q. Now why do I say it is an initial rejection?

Well simply because Nathanael still goes to see at Philip’s invitation and also because **TODAY THERE IS A LOT OF COVERT (under the surface) SEEKING GOING ON.**

Let me read you the encounter in full it’s just 5 verses:

(Verse 47-51) “

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”

<sup>48</sup> “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

<sup>49</sup> Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” <sup>51</sup> 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’ 2 part Prescription

If you wanted to boil down Jesus’ approach to people who seek him, there are ORDINARILY two things which he does:

- The FIRST – is to SHOW US OURSELVES
- The SECOND – is to SHOW US HIMSELF

Jesus does this with Simon – “Jesus looked at him (the Greek here is an intensive word – it kind of means he looked him over or studied him) and said: ‘You are Simon Son of John. You will be called Cephas (which when translated is Peter)’”.

At a level it is scary – Jesus shows us the true us – HOWEVER it is not as terrible as it might be BECAUSE he shows us what we are BOTH before and after.

For Simon, he had before him one who he knew was very IMPULSIVE but who would one day become someone whose true name and nature would be ROCK SOLID – Petros/Peter means Rock.

It’s funny but both Simon and Nathanael are similarly IMPULSIVE:

- if SIMON was one who rushed in where angels would have feared to tread
- NATHANAEL was just as IMPULSIVELY DISMISSIVE

When Jesus sees Nathanael again he assesses him as he approaches and he says:

“Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”

Jesus can tell that Nathanael has a tremendous straightforwardness about him – which probably, on the negative side

means that he can be somewhat abrasive as a character.

So how does he know this – well “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

### The fig tree

We don't know what it was that had been taking place at the fig tree. It may have been that Nathanael was enjoying the shade that fig trees traditionally give and that he was praying or meditating there.

But whatever it was it brings out a remarkable confession: “Rabbi (verse 49), you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

### Q. Verse 50-51 a caution?

I confess that I have always read the last 2 verses as a solid compliment to Nathanael – but the more I reflect on it, the more I wonder whether there is a note of caution injected there:

- In the beginning, he has to be sped up in the faith department – Philip says “Come and see”
- Now, at the end, Jesus is subtly saying something along the lines of “Whoa there – wait up a bit”

You see it is good that our faith is well grounded and for that we need more than just a single or a couple of support pillars.

This is why you need to read your whole bible and continue to read it cover to cover on an ongoing basis. Then you will come to be clear about the reasons why you do believe the things you believe.

These last verses are a reference to Jacob & his dream there in Genesis 28 and the story of Jacob's life was one of a crooked man made straight – a Jacob – a twister became one called Israel who had been straightened out by God.

This vision in the closing verse was like a deposit guaranteeing that Jesus would over time change him just like he did with Jacob.

## **CONCLUSION**

So then, this morning, 3 Close Encounters of the First Kind:

- John the Baptist – who is a DEFLECTOR – never happier than when he is in the background & Jesus is in the foreground
- Andrew – who is an ATTRACTOR – never more at home than when he is bringing people to Jesus
- Nathanael, who is the hardest nut to crack – who is DISMISSIVE – “Nazareth. Can anything good come from there!”

Yet even he gets DISMISSIVENESS decisively, by degrees DISMISSED.

Let's pray .... AMEN