

## ***“We Have Found the Messiah”***

**By Gil Bailie**

January 14, 2018 – Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: 1 Samuel 3.3b-10, 19; 1 Corinthians 6.13c-15a, 17-20; John 1.35-42

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So familiar are we with the story of Jesus selecting his inner circle of followers that we tend to miss its meaning for us, namely, that Jesus very intentionally established the Church. The Church did not form later in remembrance of him. Rather, it was the Lord’s chosen instrument for being physically and sacramentally present in history until the end time.

Jesus seems at times, however, to have taken greater care in forming the Church than in assessing the apostolic suitability of those he chose to lead it. His selection of some of his disciples appears to have been remarkably impromptu, a mark of his reliance, not on human calculation, but on the Spirit by whom he consented to be led.

This reliance is also evident in John’s gospel, where we find that Jesus performed his first miracle only after being prompted to do so by his mother. Similarly, his first disciples found their way to him due to the initiative of John the Baptist. Thus the public ministry of Jesus, and the formation of his inner circle of disciples that coincided with it, were set in motion by the two figures who embody the bond between the Old Testament and the New: John the Baptist and the Mother of the Lord. In neither case did Jesus take the initiative.

At Cana he seems, in fact, to have been initially resistant – not of course with respect to his mission but concerning the timing of its inauguration. “My hour has not yet come” (Jn 2.4). In John’s gospel, Jesus awaited, rather than initiated, both the inauguration of his public ministry and the hour of his suffering and death. Had all the preparations been made? Was the journey of the Old Testament complete? Had all its resources been exhausted? If the Old and New Testaments were to retain their indispensable linkage, the inauguration of the New would necessarily await some acknowledgment, and two figures served as the connecting link between them: the final prophet, John, and the fullest flower of Old Testament Judaism, the Blessed Virgin.

### **From the Old to the New Testament**

When the two disciples of John the Baptist move from John to Jesus, one can almost hear the creaking of the hinges on the door that opens from the Old to the New Testament. The great and final work of the entire biblical tradition has begun at last. In the next chapter of John’s gospel, the Lord’s mother – on behalf of her beloved Jewish people and the whole world – will invite Jesus to formally begin his public ministry. Thus the requisite acts of mutual recognition, by which the Covenant spanned the Old and New Testaments, were gracefully performed.

John the Baptist gently performed this pivotal role by directing his disciples to Jesus, declaring him to be the “Lamb of God.” In response, his two disciples were drawn almost hypnotically to Jesus. One was Andrew, the

brother of Simon, and the other was most likely John, the beloved disciple. They must have been taken aback when Jesus turned on them and said, “What do you want?” These are the first words Jesus speaks in John’s gospel, and it would not be too much to say that Jesus came into the world to help humanity come to grips with precisely this question.

## “What Do You Want?”

What do we want? What do we really want? Other creatures have instincts and appetites, but they don’t have *desire*. Desire is not what defines them, as it does us. We spend most of our lives wanting more, rarely pondering the anthropological implications of this gigantic fact of our existence, or recognizing it as the defining characteristic of our species. What is your heart’s desire?

Desire is religious at its core, and when its religious essence is ignored, it grows both irresolute and ravenous. Desire is debased in direct proportion to the debasement of the moral constraints that once protected it. Much that passes for desire today is so weak and mercurial that it must be acted upon quickly before it dissipates. Thus the immense salience of the first words of Jesus in John’s gospel. “What do you want?” Jesus came, not to curb our desire, but to intensify it, to free it from its enslavement to glamorous worldly allures, and to redirect it toward its proper object: the will of the Father in each of our lives.

The two disciples of John the Baptist are drawn to Jesus precisely because someone they admire has shown a great interest in him. They do what we so often do: they desire what someone else has designated as desirable. In this case, of course, they are not succumbing, as we so often do, to an advertising campaign or the glamor of popularity, power, or social prestige. John has aroused in them the deepest desire of all, and he has pointed to the One – the only One as it turns out – whose desire, to do the will of his heavenly Father, can be imitated without turning the imitator into a shallow replica of someone else.

Finally, we have in our midst the *Logos* in the flesh: the living embodiment of what it means to be a creature made in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God. Jesus – while he walked the earth and as he abides with us in the Church and especially in the Eucharist – is the definitive manifestation of what it means to be a creature destined to share in the Trinitarian life of God. We ourselves fulfill the human vocation precisely to the degree that our desire to live and love and suffer and die as Jesus did has been awakened.

## The Incarnational Nature of Christianity

It appears that the two disciples were caught off guard when Jesus abruptly turned to them and asked, “What do you want?” One of them blurted out, “Where are you staying?” – an embarrassingly inane question that may have mortified his companion for its lack of religious seriousness. But it was the right question, for a central theme in John’s gospel is that of *abiding*. Whereas the disciple asking the question surely meant to ask where Jesus was staying, the author of the gospel has chosen a word with great care. On this word, it could be said, the entire gospel of John turns.

*Abide in me as I in you. (Jn 15.4)*

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. (Jn 15.9)*

*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. (Jn 15:10)*

To the seemingly frivolous question – “Where are you staying?” – Jesus replies: “Come, and you will see.” There is no other way. Christians are those who have responded to that invitation. “So they went and saw where Jesus was staying, and they stayed with him that day.” Lest we think, as earlier biblical scholars once did, that the higher christology of John’s gospel comes at the cost of its historical reliability, the Evangelist adds: “It was about four in the afternoon.” The concrete historical event gave exquisite expression to the timeless mystery of Christian discipleship: Come and see.

The pivotal role played by Mary and John in retaining the unity of the scriptures is commensurate with this grounding in historical particularity. Each represents the early Church's resistance to an incipient Gnostic tendency to undermine the very meaning of the Incarnation by dehistoricizing and dematerializing the gospel.

Thus we can appreciate the connection between today's gospel and the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. For Paul, too, was obliged to defend the incarnational nature of Christianity by challenging a proto-Gnostic penchant for denying the spiritual significance of the body. Anticipating the Gnostic heresy that has attacked Catholic Christianity in every age, including our own, Saint Paul declares that we can neither become slaves of our carnal impulses nor ignore the body's role in our destiny and mission. The body, as Saint John Paul II taught us, has a theological meaning that must not be disparaged.

## All Are Called

Once the human race (represented by Israel) and Israel (represented by John and the Mother of the Lord) have played their role in the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry, Jesus acts with commanding authority. "They were astonished at his teaching, for his word was with authority" (Lk 4.32). When Andrew approached Jesus the second time, accompanied by his brother Simon, Jesus declared in no uncertain terms that Simon's life was no longer his to determine. "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas" – "which is translated Peter" (Jn 1.42) – the Rock on whom the Church would rely for its unity.

Turning, in conclusion, to the first reading for today, we see the launching of another vocation, that of the prophet Samuel. What we might learn from this story is that those who have for many years tried to live out their own religious vocation can and should serve as mentors for those whose vocation has yet to fully form. What the old priest Eli did for the young Samuel bears a resemblance to what John the Baptist did for Andrew and his companion, as it does to the lifework of the apostle Paul.

We must never forget that young Catholics, whether they know it or not, are called to a Christian vocation unique to each of them – whether it be to the laity, the priesthood, or the consecrated life. Like Samuel, and like Andrew and Simon Peter, these younger members of Christ's Church may well miss their vocation, or discover it later than the Lord would want, without the guidance of elders who follow the example of Eli and John the Baptist.

Again, whether we have a lay or priestly or consecrated vocation, if it is lived with joy and hope and zeal, it should serve to awaken vocations in others, especially the young on whom the future of the Church depends.

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### ***For Further Reading***

Benedict XVI, [General Audience \(7 November 2017\) – The Year of Faith. The Desire for God](#)

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [##717-726](#)

Francis, [“Letter to Young People on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Preparatory Document of the 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops” \(13 January 2017\)](#)

Peter Kreeft, [“Why Did Christ Establish the Church?”](#)

[“Pope John Paul II on Vocation”](#)

### ***In Short . . .***

- ***Jesus’ ministry and the formation of his circle of disciples were set in motion by two figures embodying the bond between the Old Testament and the New: John the Baptist and Mary.***
- ***Jesus came into the world to help humanity come to grips with precisely this question: “What do you want?”***
- ***Jesus came to intensify our desire, to free it from its enslavement to worldly allures, and to redirect it toward its proper object: the will of the Father in each of our lives.***
- ***We fulfill our human vocation precisely to the degree that our desire to live, love, suffer, and die as Jesus did has been awakened.***
- ***The story of Samuel and Eli teaches us that those who have for many years lived out their own vocation can serve as mentors for those whose vocation has yet to fully form.***
- ***Whether we have a lay or priestly or consecrated vocation, if it is lived with joy, hope, and zeal, it should serve to awaken vocations in others.***