



Sermon: - 15th January 2017

“What are you seeking?”

Isaiah 49:1-7 ; John 1:29-42

When I was a child my family holiday every year was spent camping in Arran. This is because my father was the BB captain at the time and so our family holiday was taken alongside the BB camp. It was basic camping, ridge tents, portaloos, no sewn-in ground sheets so ants and beetles were frequent bedfellows, not to mention the occasional sheep. One morning my dad was detailed to go and buy some milk at the local farm. He pulled on his wellies, the only sensible footwear in damp and muddy Arran and went in search of his car keys. The keys were nowhere to be found. He searched everywhere; we searched everywhere! In a tent there aren't that many places to look but the keys were well and truly lost. We went about our day, I can't remember what we did that day but for the entire day my dad was complaining that his wellies were hurting. You can see where this is going! When he took his Wellington boots off that night the keys fell out! The moral of this story is that when you're looking for something, what you find depends very much on where you look!

The people we met in the readings today were looking for something. “What do you want?” This question Jesus asked of John's disciples is translated in various ways, depending on what version of the Bible you are using. In some versions it is “what are you looking for?” and, in others, “what are you seeking?” And really both the English words want and look need to be taken together to get the full sense of what this question means because the Greek word used here has a much deeper meaning than just what the word “want” implies. There is a sense of enquiry in the Greek word which is completely missing from the English word “want”. Seek is a better translation. The dictionary definition of “seek” is: to go in search of, or in quest of and so seek is better in this context with its sense of determinedly looking for something that we want or need, or both. When Jesus asks this question he is not suggesting that they are engaged in careless looking, or casual wanting, rather what he asks implies that they want to fulfil an earnest desire for something. So really the question ought to be, “what are you seeking?”, rather than, “what do you want?”

John's two disciples were following Jesus. They probably didn't mean to bother him ... didn't mean to catch his attention but now he has turned and looked them in the eye; and what a look! I can just imagine! I think when Jesus looks at people he sees right inside

them. It would be a piercing look, unnerving; you can't hide from a look like that, you can't ignore it. And then he speaks "What are you seeking?" It could be a casual question, those words, as in, 'You look a little lost; can I help?' But of course it's not, and somehow they know it. Jesus never asks simple questions, as Isaiah says "he made my mouth like a sharpened sword!" In the mouth of Jesus these four words are actually a much bigger question than they seem. It's a penetrating question, a question that goes deep, that cuts through pretence and dissembling. As with most of Jesus' questions, it bites, it has a sting! Answer it at your peril because it will take you to places you never thought you would go. It is a question that can judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart: 'What are you seeking?' And it's a question he asks of all of us.

But just for a moment I want to leave that to the side and consider a different issue because when I was preparing for this morning something struck me. It struck me that preaching, and indeed writing, a sermon is a very odd activity. In a way a sermon is like the answer to a question, or at least it should be, except that it is probably not just one question, it's 30 questions or 50 questions or 80 questions. What's more when I sit down at my desk to write my sermon I don't know what these questions are! So what I'm doing I suppose, is attempting to answer my own questions in the hope that by doing that I'm also answering the questions that some of you have. But that makes it a very imprecise activity. It's as if I'm facing a thirsty crowd and instead of giving everyone a drink I'm sprinkling everyone with water from a hose and hoping that some of you at least will have your thirst quenched.

This week when I started to prepare the question that sprang into my mind from the readings was this one, what are you seeking? And it struck me that I don't know what you are seeking, each of you, any of you. And until I know, I will continue to sprinkle you with water from a hose rather than offer you a drink. To some extent this problem is a feature of my relative newness in the congregation and the community. I'm getting to know you, some of you more quickly than others, but it is a slow process. But even if I knew you all well, I would still only be guessing at the questions that the passage we read on a Sunday might be raising in your minds.

So, to return to the question Jesus asked, I want to ask you this morning that same question, what are you seeking? Which I suppose is another way of asking a question which I hesitate to ask, "why do you come to church?" I hesitate to ask it because if the answer is, "I don't know!", then you might stop coming! But it's an important question, and

it's a question to which I need to know the answer. But they are, in effect, both the same question. I might have my own ideas about this but if they are not the same as your ideas then we will not be able to communicate. But let's start with my ideas, since I don't know what yours are, and see where that takes us! I think we come to church because we are looking for something; we are looking to have some need filled. It will be different for each of us but for each of us church fulfils that need in some way, to a greater or lesser extent.

The disciples followed Jesus because they had a need to be fulfilled. Ultimately I think what they were looking for was a relationship. I don't know why they needed that relationship, perhaps they didn't even know they needed it until they met Jesus, and he looked at them, and he asked them that question. But as we read the New Testament it is clear that what bound them together was their relationship with one another and what bound them to Jesus was their relationship with him. Judas of course, found Jesus deeply disappointing and did not have his needs fulfilled but I think that's because he wasn't looking for a relationship. He was looking for something very different and was always going to be disappointed.

So why do you come to church? What are you seeking? There are many reasons we might come to church; for the friendship, because we enjoy the praise, the worship, because we want to learn something, because here we meet God, because to live our Christian lives we need this weekly fix of fellowship, as part of the body of Christ we need to meet with other members of that body to remind ourselves that we are part of something bigger. Once upon a time we might have come to church because it was the done thing; I think those days are largely gone but some of us, I suppose, might still be here simply out of habit. Not that that's necessarily a bad thing; there are good habits!

But I wonder if we were to distil down all our reasons to the most fundamental reason we would all have the same reason for coming to church, and it's the same reason that the disciples had, we are looking for a relationship. Whether it's a relationship with other Christians, our friends, whose company we enjoy, or whose affection and encouragement helps us to cope with the difficulties in our lives. Or a relationship with God who loves us and sustains us and helps us to live the kind of lives we want to live. In a sense both relationships are the same because they are about living the Christian life in fellowship with one another and with God and if a relationship with God is important then our

relationship with other Christians is also important because being a Christian is one of the things in life that you can't do alone.

But I'm still guessing! And so now I want to ask you to think about that question.

If Jesus was to look at you now in the eyes and ask you, "What are you seeking?" what answer would you give? What are you seeking? And what can we in the church, in the congregation, in the church family do to help you find it? What can I do as Minister here in Campsie Parish Church to attend to the needs of this congregation?

In some ways it seems like an impossible task because there is no way in 15 minutes on a Sunday morning that I can answer 30 or 50 or 80 questions. But perhaps that's not the significant thing. Perhaps what really matters is that we are here, we are worshipping God, we are supporting one another, we are asking questions, we are trying to find answers, and doing all of that together. Because that is what the church is. A group of people who are seeking! A group of people who have found Jesus but who continue to seek his will, and his presence, and his guidance and will do that together. Because in his presence, as the disciples found, we find the answers to the things we seek, whatever they might be.

But I'd still like to hear your questions!