

Advent Sunday/St Andrew's Day**Finding Jesus***Isaiah 2:1-5; John 1:35-40*

The BBC published a report recently. Gareth Talbot does not necessarily believe in God, but he's started going to church. He felt compelled to do so after taking part in one of the multi-times convicted British fascist Tommy Robinson's rallies. *"I never thought I had to choose before, but now I'm feeling like Christianity could be replaced, so that's why I feel the church needs support,"* the 36-year-old from Bradford said. He talked about the church in England being under "threat", mainly from Islam. He said his concern was about the extreme elements of Islam, not the religion as a whole...

Having returned to the church he used to attend as a child with his grandmother in Bradford, Gareth said he wanted to take more of an interest in what was going on there. "It's not that I've found God," he said. "I've never felt you need to go to church to be a Christian, but it's always been the Christian religion that's kept our values and freedoms, and that's why I need to support it now." He was among those attending September's Unite the Kingdom rally. Many of the protesters who marched in central London that day carried Christian symbols such as wooden crosses, and placards featuring Bible verses. Some were dressed as crusader soldiers.

A few days ago the BBC reported that workers had been threatened while removing flags from lampposts to put up Christmas lights in Aberdeen. Flags including saltires were put up in towns and cities across Scotland earlier this year after a social media campaign by a group behind an anti-asylum seeker protest. Aberdeen City Council said workers in the Kincorth area had now been subjected to verbal threats.

It's a small minority, north and south of the border, but it's vociferous and, in my view, desperately wrong. Nevertheless the presence of such groups, in some instances now appropriating Christian symbolism, cannot be ignored. Not just in the United States but in mainland Europe and in the United Kingdom we hear the frightened mantra of, 'take back our country', and now, 'take back our church', and even, 'take back our gospel'. Such crude tribalism, swathing itself in allegedly Christian values, has to be challenged. To say nothing is to be unintentionally complicit with this divisive wrong-headedness.

In contemporary culture there is much talk about individuals 'identifying' with something. In a world where existential questions are as great as they ever were, having some kind of idea or sense of who we are and what we stand for has become increasingly important. It matters, then, if people wish to identify with Christianity, with being a Christian, that they know what, and with Whom they are identifying. When you want to identify with Christianity, you have to go out seeking, you have to go out to find Jesus and what He means.

It's what Jesus asked Andrew and his friend when they were down by the river Jordan, with John the Baptist. "What do you seek?" He asked them. What are you looking for? Andrew and his friend had been following John the Baptist for some time. Did they have a sense of uneasiness because of the unfairness of their society? Where they looked for a leader who would stand up to the Roman invaders, or challenge the perceived ineptitude of the Jewish religious leaders? Were the times economically hard and they were looking for relief from the burden of poverty? Were they living at a time when nobody appeared to want to commit to anything; that it was everyone for themselves, that the old bonds, the old certainties were crumbling and their world was going to hell in a handcart? People who had promised to help, contracted to do certain things, had weaselled out of responsibility, and Andrew and his friend were left carrying the can for work

needing to be done? And where, in the name of all that was holy, was God in all of this? Too distant, too absent, not there at all?

"What do you seek?", Andrew, and your friend. What are you looking for that will help you take the next step in life, the next pathway in the way ahead?

The same question can be asked, by Jesus, of each of us. When you came to Church this morning, what were you seeking? Some are seeking a short respite from the perplexing burdens of work or family life, where everyone wants a piece of you and you don't know how much you have left to give of yourself. Here, in this sanctuary, maybe today you will find a little peace. Some are seeking a community, a place to belong, to connect with other people and to connect more with God in the process. Last week's Clothing Store Coffee morning. Yesterday's Morningside Hope concert and the Heart for Art work we see around us. Our choir where people gather around music and make it. A congregation where we can sing hymns ancient and modern and find ourselves plugged into the mystery of universal worship. Some are looking for a foundation upon which to build their lives. Old truths steadying amidst the swirling uncertainties of a modern world that so often has lost its moral compass. *"In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world (have we) reached the point where we...believe everything and nothing, and think that everything is possible and that nothing is true."* In economics, in media, in politics, in faith. Yet still the radiant dawn of a discovered Jesus breaks over our cynical world, and we, despite our querulous doubts, find ourselves called, with the prophet Isaiah and the children of God, to walk in the light of the Lord. Some are seeking for the healing of body or mind or soul, for themselves and for those they love, and for the whole fissuring world.

Some are seeking redemption, for a new life made on the other side of mistakes made, or opportunities missed. A chance to turn over, yet again, a new leaf, and begin once more.

And some, let's face it, are seeking the Jam, Baking and Making Stall because it's the last Sunday of the month and good things are to be found in the St Matthew Hall after this service. In amongst all that is profound and other-worldly there is that down-to-earth seeking of simple pleasures which also go into making our world a more pleasurable place in which to live.

"What do you seek?" asked Jesus. Whatever answer or answers we give will determine our life choices, and dictate our route ahead in life. We are all looking for something. Like Andrew and his friend on the banks of the River Jordan. Each one of us on a quest for something beyond ourselves, "a taste for the infinite."ⁱⁱ

Might it be the case that we are all looking for something. For identity, for purpose, for meaning, for healing. We're looking for redemption, or love, or life. We won't find it lastingly in more money, or a larger house, or a better job. Every solution like that misses the point of the search. Until we recognise our lives look for that powerful connection with God and with our sisters and brothers around us, then I think it will be the case that we will never find what we are looking for in this world.

"What do you seek?" Jesus asked. Andrew and his friend offer no answer. They respond with another question, "Rabbi, where are You staying?" Perhaps they knew that wherever He is going they might find what they are seeking.

"Come and see," invites Jesus. "Come and see."

And they see - a lifetime of miracles and healing and teaching and inclusion and welcome and kindness and challenge and sacrifice and endless, endless love.

If you want to identify with Christianity; if you want to identify with Jesus, you must be on the look-out. Your mind will be open alongside your eyes, and your heart. Your values will be shaped by integrity and compassion and commitment and grace and kindness and a desire for peace.

You'll be on the look-out to help those in need, and to keep the promises you have made. The world offers many possibilities - wealth, power, material possessions. But all will fall short in time. Like waving saltires and painting St George's cross on white roundabouts. It's not about changing the outside; it's about changing the interior.

Our quest is for the infinite. We are seeking. Jesus says, "Come and see." And maybe, just maybe, we will catch a glimpse of hope. And maybe, just maybe, we will find that He has been out there, all along, seeking us, to bring us into His loving kindness.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism*

ⁱⁱ *Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to its Culture Despisers*