

**SERMON FOR SECOND SUNDAY IN  
ORDINARY TIME 2017**

**ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD**

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“Our image of God must go”. That was the headline of ‘The Observer’ newspaper on Sunday, March 17, 1963. It was in response to a book that came out just over 50 years ago in the spring of 1963. A book called *Honest to God*. Before long, a million copies were sold in 17 languages; the author was a Church of England clergyman, John Robinson, the bishop of Woolwich in south London.

The book was a sensation, mainly because of that one premise; it’s acclamation that our images of God must go. For Robinson, the problem was the belief that we are “down here” and God is “up there”, as if sitting on a cloud.

You would all be familiar with that rather embarrassing image. It is played out time and time again in our media, advertising, and films. There is God, with a long white beard and a long white robe, almost a Santa Claus clone - without the red clothing and silly hat - sitting on a cloud.

It is not just a modern image however. Artists in the renaissance certainly played on this image; one famous artwork is God the Father by the Italian painter Giovanni Battista Cima. It is in the end, a hugely unhelpful image.

But what then, is the alternative?

Today’s Gospel is all about image. The one that stands out is of Jesus as ‘the Lamb of God’, the phrase that John the Baptist uses as he points to Jesus on two separate occasions. He is identifying

Jesus with an ancient Jewish image. The lamb in the Jewish tradition does not represent the weak, vulnerable animal, but rather the lamb as a powerful animal. The lamb reigns in the heavens and will bring about judgement on the wicked and secure salvation for the righteous.

So who is this Jesus, the Lamb of God? John's testimony is that he is more powerful than him, John Baptised with water, Jesus' with the Holy Spirit. John's realisation is that this Jesus is the Son of God; his image is starting to become clearer, he is the one who will take away the sin of the world.

Apart of this realisation for John is that his disciples will now become Jesus' disciples. His work is done, and so we have his two disciples depart and follow this Lamb of God.

And as those two disciples seek him out it is Jesus who responds first with a statement which I think is at the heart of today's passage. "What are you looking for?" "What are you looking for?" It is a striking statement. Striking because it is one of those statements that seem to echo down the ages, and is the same statement we may ask ourselves today, when we look for Jesus. "What are we looking for?" What is our image of God?

John Robinson, the author of 'Honest to God' was asking the same question in his famous 1964 book. In an article written by former priest and philosopher Mark Vernon he explains that "Robinson and his generation were intrigued with science and felt that religion must change. The same imperative is felt to this day when atheists compare religion to fairy tales and believers pen letters in

response. But I wonder whether this knockabout has actually been a distraction because, on the whole, it seems that people do not live in a demythologised world. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

It is then quite interesting to note that regular church attendance has declined, yes. But since the 1960s in Britain, belief in a "spirit or life force" has doubled, according to **British Religion in Numbers** - 41% of British people now believe in angels, 53% in an afterlife, and 70% in a soul. It may be the same here in New Zealand.

This sort of seeking speaks of something crucial going on in this flurry of spiritual experimentation and investigation. We humans are creatures who realise that our existence is too small. We yearn for

more, for connection, for meaning. All the scepticism in the world cannot put it down.

There is an eternal question that is constantly been asked, it is the same question Jesus poses to those two would be followers, what are you looking for? What image of God do you have? The problem is the answer isn't always what we expect.

In an age of seekers, being 'spiritual' is an easy task. There is no moral or ethical framework, we in a sense can pursue our own spiritual journey's and in some sense that is too be applauded. However, Jesus calls us to more. He invites us on the journey by his response to those two disciples "come and see". But when we start to figure out what that might look like, we may take pause.

That is because what we are looking for is often not what we expected. Jesus gives these early disciples a slight hint in this passage to what it is they may find. For Simon it is to be found in his renaming. “You are Simon son of John”, “You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). A nod to what Peter’s future journey will really look like; yes one of leadership and authority, but also hardship and sorrow.

And it can be the same for us. I know in my own calling, I have at times been ‘honest to God’ and said why am I a priest? Why did you call me? The road seems difficult and long.

The answer can be found in harking back to that image. Not God in the clouds, but the image of the Lamb of God. The startling image of the Messiah as lamb in John’s Gospel in fact radically rejects earlier biblical images of royal majesty. It chooses weakness and the image of the sacrificial Passover lamb. This is a shift we still have to make. You often hear of an image of God who with the click of a finger could smite all the evil unbelievers in the world.

That is not the image that John is presenting us with. Yes John the Baptist recognises that Jesus is more powerful than he, but that power is not in strength or force, but a power that lies in humility, love and a willingness to walk with those who are not the supposed righteous or powerful, but sinners and simple fishermen. Paradoxically it is this sort of life

and journey that leads to true spiritual fulfilment, happiness and joy. The harder road less travelled, the road that Jesus leads us on.

And therefore our images always need to change; we need to constantly be seeking the heart of God, a God who time and time again surprises us, by calling us to journey with him by uttering ‘come and see’. May we know that Jesus, may we hear that calling, and may we like John the Baptist point to that Jesus, and say, look, look, he is the one, he is all we ever need to know and more, follow him.