

# Second Sunday after the Epiphany

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## Introduction

The opening sequence of the gospel of John is an extraordinary poem that introduces so many of the contrasting themes of John. In it, we hear of light and darkness, of glory and of the power of *Logos*, the Word. Curiously, in the midst of this beautiful poem, there is also a strong corrective being issued (John 1:6–8): John is not the one to come. The writer is concerned to emphasise this. Once the poem ends, we encounter individuals with religious responsibilities coming to John, asking him if he is the Messiah and again and again, we hear John knowing that he is not the one, but he is the lone voice in the wilderness, hallooing out about the saviour to come.

John is a peculiar character – solitary, defiant, focused, economic with words and precise in focus. However, this peculiarity may mask something that’s so obvious it’s unremarked. John’s humility and sense of purpose was full of loyalty.

How is it for you to point towards someone whose skill, or capacity, or identity is “greater”. How do you find it to “make way” for someone else, who may eventually reap the fruit from your preparation work?

What contributions have jealousy, or rivalry, or reputation made to your own interactions with friends, family, colleagues, or people in society?

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## Text

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them

following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

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## Comment

The twin stories about John at the beginning of the gospel of John occur over two days. One day he sees Jesus and points him out to his disciples and the next day two of John’s disciples, including Andrew, go to Jesus, whom they then follow.

Apart from the references to Jesus in the Prologue, this is the first time that Jesus has entered the scene in the physicality of his flesh. And we first see him through the eyes of John. Jesus is coming towards John, and we hear John’s declaration of Jesus’ identity, but Jesus is silent. At this stage of the gospel, the Baptist is the sole voice in the wilderness of perception, hallowing the person of Jesus.

While John the Baptist is an eccentric character, all across the gospel texts he is characterised as one in whom people — ordinary people, religious authorities, even Herod — believe. While he is executed, he is not executed because of disbelief in his message, rather because of the impact of his powerful words. It is little wonder that some early Christian sects gave John too great a place of prominence and it is considered that perhaps the regular repetition of John’s subservient identity and role in comparison with Jesus is a corrective to those communities.

So John is a man of reputation, yet over and over in these early chapters of the fourth gospel we hear him a man who knows his place in the scheme of things, a place to point towards, a vocation to diminish.

The main reason that the apostle Simon Peter, the one among the followers of Jesus who receives most attention and character development across the gospel texts, came to Jesus in the first place is because Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, first followed John and then, with the direction and blessing of John, went on to follow Jesus.

Jealousy, comparison, rivalry and preservation of reputation are at the heart of so much human discord, from the most familial and internal to the transnational. Friends become jealous of a friend and seek to “put them in their place” through petty humiliations or other acceptable forms of aggression, and large groupings of people — in political, religious or other human organisations — pass comment and sanction on each other in ways that display jealousy rather than recognition of capacity of the other.

John’s witness to another is an extraordinary spiritual discipline, where faithfulness to a great vocation is the driving force, rather than fame or reputational preservation. This kind of self-giving is evident in people who love each other dearly. It seems less about strategic priorities and more about the love and identity in which one is held and within which one honours another.

When the disciples of John eventually approach Jesus, we hear the first words of Jesus in this gospel: “What are you looking for?” Their answer is in the form of a

question of domesticity; they call him Rabbi and ask where he stays, and he responds, in rich words of hospitality “Come and see.” Inasmuch as John is fulfilled in pointing beyond himself, Jesus too is faithful to his calling by gathering followers around him. Each response to vocation is faithful, one pointing towards, the other gathering in. Neither is resisting their identity or vocation, neither is causing the conflict of internal discord, but rather are responding with integrity to that which is deepest in them.

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## Response

Responses to this text can be varied.

If this is being done in a congregation, it could be that acts of hospitality are enacted between people. Or, for private reflection, a congregation could reflect on the rivalries – little and large – that exist amongst themselves, or between themselves and other congregations in an area.

Recognising the note of hospitality in this text — in the sense that John “gives” some of his followers to the new cohort of followers gathering around Jesus; and offered by Jesus in the sense that he receives the curiosity of the new followers and invites them to where he stays — it could be that the congregation decides to make gifts of hospitality, sharing and honour to neighbouring communities of faith, or community groups. It could as simple as a card honouring the important work being done in the community by another group, or a gift of resources.

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## Prayer

a liturgy could be used as part of a penitential rite:

In the life of John, we witness the power of vocation and the power of humility.

**We each have capacities and incapacities, callings and limitations.**

Often, we respond to each other with comparison, jealousy and pain.

**Help us change from the chaos of comparison, and more toward the vocation of life.**

In the life of two cousins, Jesus and John, we witness people who knew their purpose and identity.

**Our deepest purpose is love. Make us people who live in our purpose.**

We ask this in the name of Jesus, the one who invites us to join him where he is.

Amen.

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Reconciliation