

About Four O'Clock

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Second Sunday of Epiphany Year A. 18th January 2026

Isaiah 49.1-7, 1 Corinthians 1.1-9, John 1.29-42

Certain days, and particular times of day stay in our memory – those moments in life that were to shape what was to come: a flight lifting off at dusk, the first sight of a beloved one summer's morning, the rainy Friday afternoon that you realised things had to change. And so it is that John records what happened on the first day of Jesus' ministry at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

John's gospel opened with the poetic mystery of the Word made flesh, the testimony of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Today's passage describes the events of the "next day" which is the first day of Jesus' ministry – we know this because the following passage also begins "the next day" (John 1:43) and the passage after that, the wedding at Cana, begins "on the third day ..." (John 2:1).

So what happens on this significant first day. Jesus begins to draw people to himself. Two of the Baptists' disciples hear John exclaim "Look, (or Behold in other versions) here is the Lamb of God" and begin to follow him. As Revd Sue suggested in a sermon a few years ago, John's is the only gospel to set Jesus' death at the festival of Passover, and so it makes sense that here the Lamb of God refers to the Pascal or Passover lamb, rather than the sacrificial lamb of Atonement. Here is the lamb eaten before the exodus from slavery to freedom – the meal to sustain a journey that also makes us "restless of more, for a better life in the promised land."ⁱ And so the two follow him.

Jesus does not command that they follow but asks them "What are you looking for." As he so often does, Jesus gets people to look within, to discern a direction, examine their motivations. What are we looking for? It is a question that does not have a ready answer because it is very big question – but it is a question that begins to open hearts. The two can't answer directly but ask where he is staying, perhaps hoping to be invited to learn more. Jesus' response is one that applies to each of us on a search: "Come and see" – there's nothing to be learnt from standing still – come, walk, follow – and observe, watch, be open – Come and see.

So they came and saw and stayed. "It was about four o'clock in the afternoon." In some translations it is the "tenth hour" meaning the tenth hour after sunrise and some two hours before sunset. Some commentators, after Augustine, see a significance in the number ten – a perfect number, therefore the perfect time – or the time being ripe to follow Jesus. Some translations give a sense that they stayed "for it was" late – in those times, it would have been too late to journey back home, and hospitality customs would have required that food and shelter be offered at that hour. Others surmise the late hour was mentioned to highlight the eagerness of the followers and of Jesus – regardless of the hour. But also, as I said at the beginning, the time in which significant life events take place stays in the memory – about four 'clock was indeed the very hour on the first day that the first followers of Jesus came and saw and stayed – the very moment that those from whom the author of the gospel had the story, would never forget.

About four o'clock was the time a decision had to be made – to go, or not, to see, or not see. I often think that about four o'clock is a strange time of day – unremarkable if you are in the swing of something, but odd if you are at a loose end, or have just arrived home. Just past afternoon tea-time, and not quite beer-o-clock. Perhaps the moment you realise that the day has frittered away and now it's too late to start anything, or even have a nap. About that time in the studio sometimes I take stock of what I've been doing, decide it's a disaster zone and go for a walk to blow the brain fog away. About four o'clock is a time for reflecting on the hours now past, and deciding what the evening, and the next day will hold.

The 'about four o'clock' feeling can strike us at various stages of life, triggering a crisis, or depression. At worst we fall into a state of inertia, but at best it is the quiet moment, the curious lull when we start to look ahead. For the disciples it was the moment from which they stayed with Jesus - for the rest of the day, the night, the following day, the rest of their lives. Again other translations give a slightly different layer of meaning in words such as dwell and abide – which carry the meaning of living with, or even living within. This is a relationship that asks us to stay – to dwell with Christ even as we make our exodus from all that has entrapped us.

So about four o'clock we decide to move into a new phase of life. We are now in the season of Epiphany, but, as Revd Bill said a couple of weeks ago, epiphany is not so much a single lightbulb moment as a process of making manifestⁱⁱ – a process that gets underway by obeying an impulse to follow, to come and see, and to gather others about us to join the expedition. Andrew goes to find his brother Simon, who quickly comes to understand that not only is Jesus the Anointed One, but that he anoints others to their task. In Simon's case this takes the form of new name – Cephas from the Aramaic – translated as Peter, the rock – the rock on whom Christ will build the church.

Peter is given a new name - it might also be said that in hearing the call and undertaking this journey while abiding with Jesus, we shall all hear our true name, and discover our true selves. As Isaiah has it *The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.* (Isaiah 49.2) Paul also speaks of being called – called to be an apostle, called into fellowship with Christ, and enriched with the gifts of the spirit. (1 Cor. 1.1-9)

And so, around the four o'clock marks of our days, let us listen for that call to be our most authentic selves. Let us open our hearts and ask ourselves what we are looking for, longing for, hoping for. Let us undertake the journey toward freedom. Let us join in the good work we are anointed for and join with others in the quest. Let us follow, abide with, and make manifest in our own lives, the Word made flesh. How we do this, and what shape it will take, will be revealed as our lives unfold - but for now, we simply need to come, see, and stay. Amen.

ⁱ Sue Lodge-Calvert, *Behold the Lamb of God*, Second Sunday after Epiphany 16th January 2011

ⁱⁱ Bill Leadbetter, Sermon for *Epiphany Sunday*, 4th January 2026