

**Sermon given on 15th January 2017
by the Revd. Canon Dr. Marion Chatterley**

There's a woman on the deli counter at the supermarket I usually shop at. For months she served me politely but with no recognition. Then, one day, something was happening in the store and we began to chat. Nothing deep or meaningful but a human to human connection. Since then, she welcomes me to her counter and gives every indication that she knows who I am. And I now know a little about her. We like to be known; we like to be recognized; it reinforces our sense of self. Something similar can happen in neighborhood communities. People talk about the days when they knew everyone in the tenement stair, or spent time chatting over the garden fences. One of the limitations of our contemporary way of life is that for many people those connections have gone. People work long hours and quite insular lives. Children are less likely to call the neighbors auntie and uncle; older people are perhaps more isolated than they once were. We don't shop locally on a daily basis so we're unlikely to pick up a pint of milk for the old lady next door. In turn, that means that we won't engage with her in the same way.

Today's Gospel is about recognition and calling by name which then leads to engagement – and that happens in two steps. Firstly, John the Baptist identifies Jesus – here is the lamb of God. And then Jesus calls the first disciples and he gives a special name to Simon.

This is the lamb of God. This is someone who is fundamentally different. Notice him; learn who he is; recognize him. And, of course, only when we recognize an individual do we actively engage with them. Only when we see someone as an individual, not one of a crowd, do we take an interest in who they are. So here is the lamb of God; here is someone who brings something distinctive and sacred and transforming into our lives.

John the Baptist pointed out Jesus – he drew him to the attention of the two disciples who were with him. He had been changed by his engagement with this man, albeit from a distance, and he was sharing his understanding with the others. John said: I myself did not know him...

John hadn't spoken to him, he hadn't engaged directly with him but he had recognized this man as the son of God, the one for whom he had been waiting. And John the Baptist had been waiting since he was a baby in the womb – remember the story of the visit of Mary to Elizabeth, the very first encounter between these two world changing figures. This morning, John tells the two

disciples about his next encounter with Jesus – I saw the Spirit of God descend on him... and as a result of that vision he was able to confidently identify Jesus: This is the lamb of God.

The second part of the story tells us how these two disciples responded to seeing Jesus, tells us how they were immediately drawn to follow him. And then Jesus responds to them by telling Simon that his name will change and he will be known as Cephas. He is given a special name, he's singled out. And that is the name by which we know him two millennia later.

Knowing someone's identity helps us to engage with them to individualise our understanding of who they are and how we might engage with them. So when we think about the disciple Peter we have a range of ideas and thoughts about who he was and what he has to teach.

We've probably seen enough artistic depictions to have a picture in our imaginations of who we're talking about. We can conjure him up in our mind's eye. We recognize him – in the stories about him and in the images of him. If we see a stained glass window with a man holding a set of keys, we translate immediately and know who the artist is depicting.

Going back to the woman on the deli counter – I could know her actual name by reading her name badge. But that told me nothing about who she is, gave me no sense of her. The moment we began to have a dialogue, to encounter one another person to person my sense of her changed. She's no longer one of a number of shop staff who might serve me but is someone whose humanity I encounter.

So this is both about recognizing people as individuals and about engagement with those people. And it's something important to think about within the church. In a church environment we speak often about creating community, forming the Body of Christ in a particular place, working collectively to be something that is more than the sum of our parts. We do that best when we know one another. And by knowing one another I'm speaking here of something more than recognizing a face across the aisle, this is about engaging with the humanity of one another. I know that some of you have very good friends within your church family; I'm now suggesting that you learn just a little more about the people you know less well. Who has gifts that are complementary to the ones you bring? Who can you get alongside to make a difference for both them and you?

At this stage in the life of your worshipping community this is important. Potential Rectors will be looking and exploring and seeking to understand who you are and how you engage. They will be looking to see what is distinctive about this community, what identifies you. They will want to both recognize and understand something about your Body of Christ that forms here in this place and comprises all of you. And in the not too distant future you will have a new Rector who will then need to get to know each one of you and you will need to get to know him or her, to identify what is distinctive about the engagement between you and them, if there is to be new life and new mission in this place.

John the Baptist saw the spirit descend on Jesus and he was then able to identify who he was and to share that information with others. They then responded to the presence of Jesus in their community and made their commitment to him.

With the support of your new Rector, I hope that you will be able to help others to recognize and respond to the presence of Jesus in this place.