

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, Virginia
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II, Curate
16 January 2010

<p>The Second Sunday after the Epiphany Revised Common Lectionary John 1:29-42</p>

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Musée Rodin in Paris houses one of the crowning achievements of early twentieth century art. "The Thinker," by Auguste Rodin, depicts a man deep in thought.

The Thinker is strong and virile. His frame is large and his muscles are toned. If not for his stooped posture and wearied expression, the Thinker could have been Zeus or Ares, a powerful Greek god cast in bronze and twinkling in the summer sun. The Thinker's body is full of power and possibility, but the artist shows us a man unmistakably restrained by the weight of his thoughts and the depth of his contemplation.

Rodin says that the Thinker was inspired by Dante reflecting on the nature of hell as he prepared to write his epic, *Inferno*. With furrowed brow, curled toes, and his chin resting on his hand, Rodin shows us a man struggling to unravel the mysteries of life and death.

Dante took on the hard questions that many of us would rather not tackle, and he learned that the ways of God are infinitely complex. As the Apostle Paul put it centuries before, the judgments of God are unsearchable, the ways of God inscrutable.¹

From Paul to Dante, from Martin Luther to Rowan Williams, each generation of faithful Christians has tried to plumb the depths of the mysteries of God. But, in today's Gospel, Jesus offers his disciples a different model of exploration and discovery, one not bound by the limits of human reason.

To his disciples' questions, Jesus answers simply: "Come and see." Engage your feet and not your mind, says Jesus, because as your feet move, so will you. And, as your spirit moves, so will my spirit move within you.

As a Christian tradition, Anglicanism has always valued questions and conversation. Ours is a tradition that believes in finding truth through reasoned discourse. But, our reflections must never obscure the spontaneity and immediacy of our faith. Jesus asked his disciples to "come and see" not "see then come." For a Christian, faith comes before understanding. We follow first, and we see second.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist was standing along the side of the road. As Jesus passed, he said to two of his friends: "[Behold] the Lamb of God." And, at his word, those two friends began to

¹ Romans 11:33 (Paraphrased)

follow Jesus. They did not think; they did not deliberate. The disciples encountered the living God, and they followed him at once.

The story is largely the same in all four Gospels.² In Matthew and Mark, Jesus calls James and John Zebedee to his service while they are fishing, and they respond so quickly that their father is left alone in the boat!

Jesus' disciples have faith. They answer Christ's call without hesitation or pause, following their hearts before their minds could get in the way.

A few moments before I was ordained, my bishop gave me some unexpected advice: "Don't think too hard during the service," he said. "Just say yes, and God will do the rest." Ordination is one of those mysteries that it can be hard to wrap our minds around. So, too, it can be hard to understand baptism and Holy Communion. What do all these sacraments mean? From where does their authority come? What is their impact on life and salvation?

There is an intellectual adventure to be had in exploring each one of these questions, but there are some truths that we must simply come and see.

Where would we be today if we never let our hearts get ahead of our minds? Where would we be if we never joined the team, never took the leap, never risked for love?

The disciples were filled with doubts, filled with questions: Where will we stay? What will we do? How will we survive? But, Jesus has for them only one answer: "Come and See."

Like many of us, Jesus' disciples wanted to know the end of the story before they ever opened the book, but our Lord would not play their game. Jesus insists that his disciples follow him by faith. He insists that they set aside their fear, and trust in him, not in themselves.

Walk with me a while, Jesus seems to say to his disciples. Walk with me a while, and you will come to know that there is very little you really need to know. You may not yet understand my ways, but you can know that they are trustworthy and true.

The journey that the disciples began with Jesus that day led them far beyond the end of a dusty road. Their faith was a gift from God. It was not the product of persuasion nor was it the result of reason. Had the disciples paused to count the cost of discipleship, or stopped to figure out exactly what it was that God was doing in their midst, they would have been paralyzed by the weight of their thoughts. They would have been no different than Rodin's Thinker – filled with power and strength, but perched motionless on a rock, head in hand.

Come and see, Jesus says to his disciples. Come and see, Jesus says to us. Come and see.

Amen.

² Cf., Matthew 4:18-22, Matthew 9:9, Mark 1:16-20, and Luke 5:8-11.