

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, January 15, 2017**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**I Corinthians 1:1-9; Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42**  
**“Powerful words”**

Words have power. Preachers, speech-makers, orators, teachers have all known that for centuries. And if anyone needed any evidence of that, they would have seen it in spades this past week. On the one hand, there were words spoken with sincerity, with dignity, with passion and with heartfelt grace. And on the other hand, there were words spoken that left people demeaned, hurt, confused and fearful.

For good or ill, words have power. And the way we use words has power.

Everyone knows the story of how Jesus called the first disciples. He was walking beside Lake Galilee one day. He saw Simon Peter and Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. He told them to follow him and he would make them fish for people. And they left everything and followed him.

Everyone knows that's how it happened. Only that's not the way St John the Evangelist – John the Gospel writer – tells it. John the Gospel writer doesn't say that the first disciples were originally fishermen. In fact, he doesn't say what their occupation was. And John the Gospel writer doesn't say they were working by Lake Galilee. The way he tells it, this all happened the day after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. So it's reasonable to assume that the event took place somewhere south of Lake Galilee, along the banks of the Jordan. And John the Gospel writer doesn't say that Jesus spoke to the disciples before they followed him. The way John the Gospel writer tells it, they were already disciples of John the Baptizer. And their first encounter with Jesus was when the Baptizer pointed him out and uttered the words, *“Here is the Lamb of God*

*who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29*

And those words from the Baptizer had the immediate effect of changing his followers into Jesus’ followers. *The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus John 1:37.*

What leaps out at me from John the Gospel writer’s account of Jesus’ calling the disciples is the part that John the Baptizer played in it. He was perfectly willing to see his own followers leave him and follow another leader. He was quite prepared to step into the background as soon as Jesus appeared on the scene.

A short time after the events we read about today, people would ask the Baptizer what he thought about the people who were leaving him to follow Jesus. And he replied, *“You . . . are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.” John 3:28-30*

It takes faith to utter words like that. It takes courage. It takes humility. It takes grace. It takes the very things that it takes to be a follower: faith to believe in something – or someone; courage to risk acting on that faith; humility to lay aside pride and status; grace to admit that in the end, he was only a servant.

It’s quite ironic, when you stop and think about it. For by just about any measure or definition of leadership, then or now, John the Baptizer was a leader. He was a powerful character, with the courage of some pretty unpopular convictions. He spoke his mind without fear or favour. He was a spiritual leader, with principles derived from Scripture alone. He was a leader of a movement – OK, so history shows that it may have been a short-lived movement, but for a time, it was still a movement. He was a leader of people, whose followers found his words compelling,

convincing, persuasive.

The irony is that he was all these things AND he was the model of a follower. Faithful enough to believe in the One who came after him. Courageous enough to do it all for the One who came after him. Humble enough to lay aside pride and any status he might have won for himself by his courage and his faith, so that the One who came after him might increase. Gracious enough to admit that he was the servant of the One who came after him. Prepared to be a leader who was first and foremost a follower. A follower of the Lamb of God.

For as soon as he saw Jesus coming toward him, John declared, *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* John 1:29. It’s not clear exactly what is meant by the words “Lamb of God.” They might mean the paschal lamb, the lamb of the Passover. Or they might mean the lamb sacrificed in the Temple. Or they might mean the lamb that is led to the slaughter in the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53.

Greater theological minds than mine have thought about it and reached no clear conclusion, so I am not going to try. It is enough for me to look back through the lens of the resurrection and say, “OK, John, I think I’ve got it. You mean that Jesus is the one who takes away the sin of the world.”

He is also, again in the words of John the Baptizer, the Son of God. The way Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story of Jesus’ baptism, it is words spoken by a voice from heaven that declare Jesus to be the Son of God with whom God is well pleased. The way John the Gospel writer tells it, those words are spoken by John the Baptizer. The leader uses his words to direct his followers to another leader, of whom he himself was a follower.

I love a story that Rodger Nishioka, Professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary, tells in his commentary on today’s

Gospel text. It says something to all of us about leading and following.

A couple of years ago, a good friend and colleague here at the seminary, who was concerned about my schedule and commitments and hectic pace and looking tired, insisted on taking me out to lunch and said it was urgent. When we sat down at the table, I asked what was going on. She told me she had some good news for me. Perplexed, I asked her what the good news was. She smiled and said, "I want you to know that the Messiah has come!"

Now I was thoroughly confused, so she told me she had even better news for me: "You are not him!"

Or in the words of John the Baptizer, *'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'* John 1:36.