

# **Sermon on Sunday 18 January 2026**

## **by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

*Gospel: John 1. 29 – 42*

### **Remakes**

I'm not a big film fan, but I can't help noticing that our film and TV industries seem ever keener on reinterpreting beloved classics of past years for a new generation. 2025 saw Disney's live action Snow White and you can always count on the BBC for their annual Agatha Christie remake. 2026 already threatens us with a new Wuthering Heights, HBO is reworking all the Harry Potter stories, and Netflix promise us two Jane Austen standards. I wonder how faithful they will be to the original?

Are you the kind of person who looks forward to discovering what new and creative angles can be given to familiar scenes and characters... or are you, like me, the kind who will sit there in growing annoyance pointing out all the good bits they've left out or spoiled, or the bits they've added that only pander to passing fads and trends... until my wife tells me to go sit in the kitchen and leave her to enjoy the film on its own.

So, maybe I'm not the right person to introduce one of history's earliest and best-known remakes – the Gospel of St John. One, maybe two, generations after St Mark's classic "Gospel", a man named John reworks the tale for a new and very different audience.

This morning's clip from John does a very different take on two familiar scenes from the original – the Baptism of Jesus, and the calling of the first disciples. There's a good start, we still get the Holy Spirit coming down on Jesus, but watch carefully – maybe you'll have to rewind that bit and look again – John the Baptist doesn't actually baptise Jesus at all. Maybe St John was so fed up with all the years of argument about why the sinless Jesus had to be baptised, that he just thought it was easiest to cut the scene out.

There is one big bit that isn't in the original version. But it's hard to grumble about this one because it really sounds like it was. 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.' One of the best loved, and most profound and most familiar of epithets for Jesus. Yet this is the first and only time we hear these words in the whole Bible. It sounds like John the Baptist is

quoting the Old Testament prophets – but he isn't. This is new, and yet like so many good new things, it has ancient roots.



It has echoes of the Passover lamb, slain on the night God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. It has echoes of the scapegoat, the ancient annual

Hebrew ritual of driving an animal off into desert with the sins of the people figuratively borne on its back.

And the name lives on in our hymns and our liturgy. We will pray to Jesus, the Lamb of God, this morning. A new thing that has become part of the heritage.

But you're more likely to notice what's missing from the next scene, the first disciples. No Lake Galilee, no fishing boats, no pairs of brothers, no iconic call to become 'fishers of men' (he'd have to make that a bit more inclusive today, anyway). Has St John's version lost something?

Instead, John the Baptist turns to two of his followers and says, 'He's the one, go follow him,' and they do. Maybe John recognises that for a new generation of believers around the Eastern Mediterranean, this new narrative might be more helpful? They are not people who met Jesus in the flesh, and they live far removed from the provincial backwaters of Galilee. They have found faith because someone else has pointed the way to Jesus and shared His Good News. Maybe St John's "remake" gets closer to our experience, too?

One of those two disciples is Andrew. 'The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon.' The first instinct of the new follower is to pass on the good news to those nearest to us. Does the remake offer another challenge we need to hear?

The first words Jesus speaks in Mark's Gospel are commands. 'Repent. Believe. Follow me.' The first words Jesus speaks in John's Gospel are... a question. 'What are you looking for?'

There's an old tale of an exchange of graffiti found on a bus shelter wall. 'Jesus is the answer' proclaimed an unnamed Christian scribbler. Beneath was written, in a different hand, 'But what's the question?' And the dialog ended with the response, 'It doesn't matter'.

That's kind of true – for those who have already put their faith in Him. But it can sound awfully smug to everyone else. Unless we are prepared to help them to find the question that they need to ask.

Down the centuries, the Church has been very good at telling people what the answers are, often without waiting for them to ask a question. Or telling them that they are asking the wrong questions. Would we get a lot more engagement with the wider world if we opened our dialog with those first words of Jesus, 'What are you looking for?'

And we don't need to worry that we might not have an answer. Certainly not by having the off-pat, neatly pre-packaged answers that our creeds and catechisms might sometimes encourage.

We might achieve more by sharing openly our own questions, doubts and fears, and then setting off together to wherever we need to go to find an answer, stumbling on together towards trust and truth.

That would mean a big "remake" of the story for a lot of people in the Church. But it's faithful to the call of Jesus, and it's

faithful to the example of John – to try and tell the Gospel again in words that speak to a new generation. To find what they looking for, and maybe to find what we are looking for.