

## **Fifth Sunday in Lent Year B 2021**

### **Jeremiah 31, Hebrews 5, John 12**

*“Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Beth-sa'ida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." John 12.20-21*

It is the time of the Passover. Jerusalem is crowded with those who have come for the festival, and Jesus and his disciples are among them. In the narrative of the fourth gospel, Jesus has already come to the serious attention of the authorities – the news of the raising of Lazarus has reached them, and the high priest himself has uttered the unknowingly prophetic words that it may be expedient for one man to die for the people.

Among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. This appearance, rather out of the blue, of people who are not Jewish might take us by surprise. It needn't, however: these people are almost

certainly those whom the ancient world called “god fearers”, that is Gentiles who subscribed to the teachings of Judaism without being actual converts – without having undergone circumcision, for example. They would read the scriptures in Greek, attend synagogue gatherings, and listen to the exposition of the rabbis. They have come to Jerusalem for the Passover, the climax of the Jewish year.

Their Greekness – and remember the New Testament tends to use the word “Greek” rather generically, to mean Gentile – their Greekness is emphasized by this little episode. They come looking for Jesus, and being Greek, they ask Philip – a disciple who has a Greek name, and comes from Galilee, where Jews and Gentiles lived together. Philip goes to Andrew, another disciple with a Greek name, another Galilean. These two disciples tell Jesus, and Jesus offers a remarkable response: on being told these Gentiles wish to see him, he replies “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”. In some ways, the whole of the fourth gospel is a demonstration of the way in which the richness of Jewish life and thought expresses itself in an increasingly Greek culture. The gospels are written in Greek – rather basic Greek, on the whole, but linguistically rich nevertheless. This is never clearer than when the gospels focus on the glory of Christ. That word, glory, has a very interesting set of meanings in Greek. Its origins are not in strength or reputation so much as in visual appearance. The word for glory, *doxa*, comes from a root which means conjecture, or opinion. It is all about seeming – my opinion is my opinion because of the way something seems to me. The cognate verb means I think, but also means I seem. And so the New Testament’s sense of glory is a seeming, something visual: a king’s glory is seen in the splendour of his palaces, the number of his troops and so on and so forth.

Immediately before our gospel reading began, John describes Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem. The crowd, having

seen and heard of the Lazarus miracle, now hangs on his every deed and word. The Pharisees respond by saying to one another that there is nothing they can do – “the world has gone after him”. The crowd to which the Pharisees respond is, we are told, made up of Jews. Now the Greeks have come to see Jesus. Now, in other words, the world is there to witness, and so Jesus says “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”.

The gospel of John makes explicit the connection between glory – what we see and perceive as such – and the passion and death of Jesus. That link is made in the other gospels, in subtlety and irony – but John wants to hammer it home: the glorification of Christ is his being lifted up from the world, his being hung upon the cross just Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. The consequence of this lifting up, the result of Jesus glory, will be nothing less than life, but that life will come in the most unexpected of ways. Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies it yields much fruit. The death of the one, in being lifted up for all to

see on the instrument of execution, will be the life of the world – here in this very passage Jesus says, when I am lifted up from the world I will draw all people to myself.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus”. Little do the godfearers know what that seeing will mean. The events which follow will leave them bewildered. They know nothing of the true glory of which Jesus speaks. Their eyes are too full of the baggage of human aggrandisement, of the distortions of pride and success and worldly glory. Last week we saw Nicodemus come to Jesus by night, to have his vision repaired, his mindset reordered, to discover the truth about Jesus. Now it is not just one man but the whole of Jerusalem, the whole of the world, Jew and Greek, who must unsee and unlearn that which they thought they knew.

Darkness is coming upon the world. Literal darkness, in the night of Jesus arrest and betrayal, and metaphorical darkness as the light of the world is extinguished. We expect to see glory and God shows us

the tragedy and the agony of betrayal, violence, suffering, and death. We thought we wanted to see, but we discover that we would be better having closed our eyes. We want to see Jesus, we stare with our eyes wide open only to have them shut by the unbearable reality of evil apparently triumphant.

It turns out that rather than straining our eyes to see Jesus, we need to restrain them. We must allow God to veil our sight from that which blinds us, so that gently - slowly and haltingly - we can learn to look at the events unfolding before us. Looking with the eyes of the suffering and crucified Christ we learn to un-learn, to abandon our expectations, to be unsurprised by being surprised, to perceive by our blindness what is truly beyond the limits of our sight.

Today is the first day of Passiontide. The images around us are veiled, as a simple external expression of the un-looking to which each of us is being called. Everything we now behold as we enact the last weeks of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not so much a vision as a

provision, because everything that is happening is provisional, everything exists only in anticipation of what is to follow. That is why we take care to keep Holy Week with solemnity. Next Sunday, we begin those final days by hailing the messiah as he rides through the midst of our betrayal and abandonment to the solitude of the garden, the courtyard and the cross. We hail what we see, or what we think we see, but if our eyes remain fixed on the Son of God we will come to perceive that in fact we are thoroughly blind, needing both the darkness of Good Friday and the light of Easter day to repair and reorder our eyes.