

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Fr Jarred Mercer

Jeremiah 31.31-34

Hebrews 5.7-9

John 12.20-33

+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr says, 'Before the truth "sets you free", it tends to make you miserable'. And I think our Gospel passage provides some pretty supportive evidence for that sort of statement.

It is very easy to read this passage, or at least part of it, as a feel-good, pat your Christian self on the back message: follow me, Jesus says, and where I am there shall my servant be also. Often these sayings of Jesus, appearing throughout John's Gospel, are read as

followers of Christ being where he is in Heaven. Many of us will have heard this message preached many times: give up your sin and your old way of life, and you will gain eternal life.

True enough, on one level. This may be one side of the coin. And at times Jesus does speak in this way, 'In my Father's house are many rooms . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . that where I am you may be also' (John 14.2-3).

But we too readily, too conveniently forget, that Christ's heavenly glory is inseparable from the misery and anguish of his suffering and dying on the cross.

This passage reminds us, when we are at times so eager to forget.

The passage begins with some Greeks coming to Philip asking to see Jesus. Asking to *see*. Philip and Andrew then go and tell Jesus. And, as he does frustratingly

often, Jesus answers in a way that seems as if he has no idea what the question actually was.

Can we see Jesus? Seems to have one of two answers: 'Yes, hello, I'm Jesus'. Or, 'No, go away'. But Jesus enters into a monologue on how his hour has come to be glorified, a grain of wheat dying in the earth and then bearing fruit, that people who hate their life will keep it eternally, and that anyone who serves him must follow him and be where he is.

Then, after a voice like thunder from heaven, Jesus says that the time of judgment has arrived, and that he will be lifted up and draw all people to himself, describing his own death.

Weird. You can imagine the Greeks who approached Philip asking to see Jesus still standing there saying, 'umm, so, is that a yes?'

But they were not asking to sneak a peak at a celebrity. They're not after a selfie with Jesus. The word used for 'see' here is actually from the root, 'to know'. So they come to Philip and they're saying, 'we wish to *know* Jesus'.

And this is common throughout John's Gospel. Vision, seeing, in John is not about something being visibly present in our line of sight. It's about illumination. It is something revealed. 'No one has ever seen God', John says in Chapter 1, remember, 'but the only begotten Son has *made him known*' (John 1.18), the word used here is from the same root as 'to see' in our reading.

So Jesus' response, which seems at first like he is completely ignoring what the people want, actually gets to the real heart of the matter.

To truly know me, Jesus says, to know what all this is about, you need to watch as I am lifted up. Gaze upon my suffering and death. When I am exalted, glorified,

lifted up in suffering, then you will learn who I am. Look to me, he says, hanging and suffering and dying on a cross, see the boundless, reckless, overflowing love of God, and then you can recognise me, then you can *see* me.

In the midst of the darkness, is the glorified Christ. In the midst of the night, the light of God's perfect love breaks through. John has already told us of this, again in the prologue to his Gospel: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1.5).

The cross is the glory of Christ because it most definitively displays who God is, reveals, illuminates who God is to us.

God is love. And on the cross that love is seen to be invincible. So that in the midst of our struggle, our fears, our failures, our weakness, even in death,

nothing, nothing can overcome God's love for us. God's love in Christ touches even death.

As a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies and bears much fruit. So the fruits of God's love in the world rise from the tomb with Christ as he defeats all love's enemies.

But, then comes the rest of the story; the other side of the coin. To truly know me, Jesus says, you mustn't only take a look – you cannot gaze from a distance. To truly know me, you need to follow me; you need to show up where I am.

It might be easy, or at least simple, to praise Jesus for the display of God's endless love in the suffering of Christ on the cross. It is quite another to meet him there in the midst of it.

Here it is clear, 'To be with Christ where he is' is not some other-worldly escape route. To truly know and follow Christ is to be found where he is found.

To be Christ's followers means that we, as Christ, must reveal, illuminate, make *real*, God's invincible, perfect love in the world. In other words, we see God's love for the world, the glory of Christ, there in the midst of the world's suffering, and we go there, too. We join in on that love.

Jesus' call upon our lives to bring light to darkness, fruitful life from the grave, to follow him in his death, is not a call to escape this world and its suffering. Quite the opposite, actually.

Christ's own humanity, the Letter the Hebrews tells us, was perfected through suffering. Because it is in that suffering that God's perfect love has touched human life most supremely. Everything that it means to be a human person, all the way down to our deepest brokenness, even death, is met here on the cross with God's perfect, self-giving love, and carried through to live in new resurrection life.

So we follow Christ to the cross if we wish to truly know him, to truly *see*. And this renews us and transforms us, and it also places us with Christ on offer for the world; it places us smack in the middle of a hurting and suffering world in need of love.

And following Christ also brings us to suffer with him. Remember, before the truth 'sets you free', it tends to make you miserable.

There is a necessary suffering involved in our movement towards fullness of life, towards perfection and glory, towards union with God in Christ. It's what Jesus calls, 'losing your life'. What great spiritual teachers throughout have spoken of as losing your 'false self'.

So the question in following Christ, in salvation, in the perfection of our humanity, becomes: 'How much of your false self are you willing to shed to find your true self?' (Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 95).

This 'shedding', always feels like a death: death to our misplaced perceptions of ourselves and the world, death to our narcissistic anxiety that places us at the centre of our own universe, death to our false view of God – a god we believe exists to shelter us from the cross, rather than lead us to it.

The call to follow Christ is a call to come and die, but this death is illumination. It is a dispossession of our self, a letting the false and illusive self that we cling to drift away in self-forgetfulness, so that we can remember who we truly are.

This is a death, but as Thomas Merton put it with such beauty and precision: 'I die by brightness and the Holy Spirit'.

To lose our life, to follow Christ to the cross, is to truly know him, to join him in loving a suffering world, and to be touched by God's love even in our own darkest

night, to 'die by brightness' and be welcomed by the Spirit into the fullness of Christ's glory.