

Fifth Sunday in Lent Year B

John 12: 20 – 33

“We wish to see Jesus”. It seems a simple enough request, doesn’t it? Some Greeks seek out Philip (perhaps encouraged by his Greek name) and he along with Andrew, go and tell Jesus. Jesus then launches off into a long monologue about glory and death, wheat and fruit, loving one’s life, losing one’s life, being lifted up, being drawn. We are left in the dark as to whether the Greeks actually got to see Jesus.

So why included this snippet about seeing Jesus? Often ‘seeing’ in the Johannine gospel can be summed up in the catch phrase, “Seeing is believing”. These Greeks don’t just want to see the famous rabbi creating such a stir, they want to get to the heart of what Jesus is all about. They are serious seekers. We can see this in the word ‘see’.

Post resurrection in John’s gospel, Peter and the unnamed other disciple rush to Jesus’ empty tomb. The other disciple *sees* the discarded linen wrappings and believes. Jesus’s words about his purpose, about dying and rising suddenly make sense, the disciple gets the point, he understands. The Greek word for ‘see’ in that post resurrection scene is the same one used to describe the Greeks request. They want to get to the crux of it all, they want to ‘get’ Jesus. They desire the deeper seeing that leads to belief.

Jesus’ rather complex monologue speaks into this seemingly simple request. If you want to truly see me, understand me and what I’m about, keep watching how the next few days unfold. Watch the journey to the cross, watch me lifted up. This is how you will see me for who I truly am, by seeing my crucifixion and believing in its purpose, to redeem the world and draw people to myself and to my Father.

Notice how Jesus speaks of his impending death. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”. The hour is the crucifixion when he will be lifted up. So where’s the glory in that? Paradoxically the glory comes out of the suffering. The grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die. The dying is absolutely necessary for the wheat to achieve its purpose, to rise again transformed to nourish and sustain life.

In the same way,” [Jesus’] own life and death is not just a story of a great teacher and a great hero who comes to an unhappy end; this is a life with purpose for the world... just as the purpose of a grain of wheat is...[to] eventually make bread for the world”¹. What looks like loss is actually gain. What looks like defeat is actually victory.

Jesus then goes onto to talk about losing and keeping life. Whoever loves their life will lose it and whoever hates their life will keep it for eternity. We have heard Jesus talk like this before. It’s reminiscent of his sacrificial teaching about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses. Sadly, throughout the ages there has been some bizarre interpretations of what hating one’s life actually means, such as examples of extreme asceticism, that have denied any joy or pleasures in life.

However, to “hate one’s life in this context is [probably more about having] a higher, more all-encompassing allegiance than that of one’s own survival”². It’s about not selfishly making ourselves the centre of our universe. It isn’t about hating our lives and doing our utmost to make them miserable for Jesus. There’s enough people out there who will gladly make our lives a misery without us beating ourselves up erroneously thinking it’s what Jesus wants.

So if our allegiance is to Jesus, we have made a decision to follow and serve him. Therefore, we shouldn’t be surprised if that following at times takes us into uncomfortable, uncharted areas. Jesus says, “Where I am, there will my servant be also”, which sounds marvellous when we think about Jesus post ascension sitting at the right hand of God in heaven. But not so marvellous when we think about Jesus mixing with the outcasts, or situations of rejection and suffering reminiscent of Jesus being lifted up on a cross in front of a baying, sneering mob.

¹ “Understanding Jesus” by Rowan Williams. Sermon at St Michael’s College, March 2012. <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2441/understanding-jesus-archbishops-sermon-at-st-michaels-college>

² “The Gospel according to Saint John” by Andrew T. Lincoln, 2005, p.350.

But the fact is, Jesus wants us to be involved, to be where he is or would be. We are to become part of the tragedy and glory of the cross, part of the story to lift him up, to be revealed to others. To be part of why Jesus came, to love and suffer for this world, to be part of glorifying the name of God.

So how is God glorified? Jesus makes that request, “Father, glorify your name” and God responds, “I have and I will”. Did you know that in Greek the word for ‘glory’ and ‘reputation’ were the same? In essence Jesus is asking God to show forth the reputation he has in the world and God responds³. God places his glory, his reputation, into the person of Jesus: misunderstood, reviled and rejected, while all the while loving and forgiving those who revile and reject him.

And God does that with us doesn’t he? God places his reputation into our hands every day. Every day that we step outside our front door into the world, identifying as a follower of Jesus, we are responsible for the reputation of Jesus and God in this world. For the world out there, to see us is to see Jesus and to see Jesus is to see God, in whatever ways we present them. God allows us to be the keepers of his reputation. Is that a scary or delightful thought?

I want to finish with a few more thoughts you may wish to reflect upon as we journey ever closer to Easter?

The Greeks came to Philip asking to see Jesus. If people came to you asking to see Jesus, what would you say? What would you show them?

If following Jesus is being where he is, or would be, where would Jesus be today, and are you be willing to be there also?

And finally, if God has placed his reputation into our hands, how are we doing as signposts, as ambassadors? Are people able to see him for who he truly is?

³ “Tuesday” by James Alison. <http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng42.html>