

Idle curiosity or faithful discipleship?

Revd Dr Jeanette Hartwell's Sermon for 21 March 2021 Fifth Sunday of Lent – John 12:20-33

Today the church celebrates Passion Sunday, the Fifth Sunday of Lent and our thoughts begin to turn to the last events of Jesus' life on earth. Next week we shall celebrate Palm Sunday - Jesus entering Jerusalem and being hailed as a King by the people. And we see in the events recorded as we journey through Holy Week that it was not an easy journey for Jesus to make - the doubt, the inner conflict and yet today's reading suggests a recognition from Jesus that the end is approaching and we are drawn in journeying with him to wrestling with what the life and death of Jesus means for us as his disciples.

And the reading from John 12:20-33 appears a strange one because on first hearing it might appear to make no sense at all. From the outset we are drawn into a theme of liberation with the setting of the celebration of the Passover festival, the celebration of the liberation from slavery in Egypt. And indeed, John places the passage before us today after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12:12-15) and a narrative of Jesus' increasing popularity with the crowd because of the signs that he had performed.

Amongst the many who have come to worship at the festival John draws attention to some Greeks who wish to see Jesus and when Jesus is told of this, instead of being delighted that people are interested in him and arranging a meeting he responds to Philip and Andrew's request by starting to speak in riddles. So what are we to make of all this?

There is no doubt that at this time Jesus' popularity was on the rise and that there is fear and concern amongst the religious authorities of the day. At a time of religious fervour and political tensions (the two often go hand in hand) people were undoubtedly drawn to Jesus and it was not uncommon for individuals to be claiming that they had come with the special purpose of restoring Israel and overthrowing the Roman rulers. Tensions then were high and there was much at stake in terms of religious observance and political unrest. In this context John draws attention to God fearing Greeks (why else might they be at the festival?) as outsiders who want to know more about this man Jesus and the claims he was making.

In his response to Philip and Andrew's request, Jesus avoids the temptation of becoming the local celebrity, no doubt with the memory of his entry into Jerusalem firmly in his mind. What we don't read in John's account of this encounter is Jesus perhaps questioning why they wanted to see him, of trying to decide whether it is nothing more than idle curiosity, or whether they were genuine in their desire for an audience with him. Perhaps they genuinely wanted to debate on an intellectual level and question him in order to come to their own mind about him, or alternatively, whether they simply want to see him so that they could say that they had.

And so, Jesus in his answer goes deeper than the immediately obvious. Unconcerned with the motives of those who want to see him, he begins to explain what he's really about and that has nothing to do with seeing him, with intellectual debate or following him because he is the celebrity of the day.

The time has come - my time has come says Jesus in stark contrast to the earlier comments in John that his time has not yet come (in John 2 to his mother at the wedding in Cana and John 7 when some tried to seize him while he was teaching in the temple courts). Here then is the moment to which John has been pointing, when the time is come for the Son of Man to be lifted up in order that all the world might see Jesus and recognise him, in order that God's glory be revealed. This will be the time when all the world (represented by 'the Greeks') and not just faithful Israel will see and believe in him, not through intellectual debate but through the saving action of Jesus, the man who willingly goes to the cross to confront sin and evil.

And Jesus uses the agricultural imagery of seeds in the ground to drive home his point, suggesting that it is not going to be as might be expected. In fact, on the contrary it might look hidden and be perceived as a complete disaster. The joy for those of us this side of the resurrection is that we know the ending to the story but Jesus is painting a very different picture than what people might have been looking for or expecting. The time for preparation is over and the true picture of who Jesus is, is about to be revealed.

One of the major themes of John's gospel is seeing and knowing and we see it (to excuse the pun) being played out in this passage. The Greeks wish to see Jesus, not only in the physical sense but in getting to know him and who he truly was. We might ask ourselves what it is that we want to see in Jesus? What is our motivation? Are we merely curious in seeing what it's all about without necessarily wanting to take to heart the disturbing points that Jesus goes on to make about losing our life? Interestingly we are not told whether the Greeks got to see Jesus, both in the literal sense of meeting with him or in them getting to know who he claimed to be.

There are several responses to merely seeing Jesus, to being inquisitive, to recognising the man that people have been talking about and coming to believe in who he said he was. And Jesus is perhaps indicating in his response that it is simply not enough to see and engage in an intellectual discussion but what is required in truly knowing him is a change in attitude as to our whole life. And this from a Rabbi who as we know from the gospels was not afraid to engage in rigorous debate, as was their tradition.

So what are we to make of Jesus's discussion of our losing our life in order that we might keep it for eternal life. So often I think that we interpret this in the sense of some form of grand scale martyrdom, that our discipleship might demand some grand gesture of costly sacrifice. Yet it seems to me that what Jesus is asking of us is the small almost seemingly inconsequential acts contained within the process of dying to self, of being attentive to the ways in which we are tempted to act in ways that serve self rather than God, of the daily decision to face the cross, and attempt, by God's grace and God's grace alone to live lives that reflect God's glory.

It is in these daily acts of self-denial that God's glory continues to be revealed and in many ways these acts are buried like the grain that falls into the earth. They are often held between God and ourselves buried in the soil of our ordinary, everyday, daily existence. There is a sense in which it requires a certain degree of dogged determination and persistence and I suspect that John is warning us in the words of Jesus that it is not for the fainthearted. And just as we might wait for new shoots to break forth from the ground so too, we wait with patience for what God will bring about in God's good time. It is a timely lesson perhaps as we begin to emerge

tentatively from Lockdown with Easter just around the corner. We are a faith community that has death and resurrection at the heart of its being. As we journey over the next few weeks with Jesus as he makes his way to Golgotha what might God be asking us, as individuals and communities to allow to fall to the ground and to die in order that it might bear much fruit in the future?

And so may God grant us dogged determination, faithful patience that we might see God's glory. Amen.