



SAINT LUKE'S

“WE WISH TO SEE JESUS”

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
YEAR B

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

PSALM 51

HEBREWS 5:5-10

JOHN 12:20-33

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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We wish to see Jesus. This is the moment at which John's gospel pivots from a renewal movement within the Hebrew faith to a universal proclamation. The key to understanding this moment in John's gospel is who is doing the asking. The people wanting to see Jesus are Greeks. They are among the thousands of people from all over the Roman Empire, Jews and Gentiles - a catch-all term meaning all non-Jews - who are in Jerusalem for Passover. These Greeks have heard about Jesus, including Jesus' most extraordinary miracle yet of raising Lazarus from the dead. Probably these Greeks are already what the Jews call "God-fearers". They may attend synagogue in their home towns and come to Jerusalem for major festivals. And when they go to the Temple in Jerusalem, they can be admitted into the court of the Gentiles though not any further. These Greeks approach Philip for a reason. Philip is from Bethsaida, near the border with the Greek towns of the Decapolis. Philip is a Greek name, and he may be of Greek parentage and speak their language.

The Greeks asking to see Jesus marks a crossroads in his ministry. Until this point, Jesus has said many times that the hour has not yet come.¹ But now it has. *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* Now is the fullness of time. It is the hour of the Cross.

We wish to see Jesus. Seeing and believing are not always the same thing. Jesus' disciples see a lot of Jesus. They see his miracles and hear his teaching but they only understand some things, some of the time. Same

¹ John 2:4; 7:4; 7:30; 8:20

with us. To begin to understand the Cross, we need to see as Jesus sees.

What Jesus sees is that everything is leading to the Cross. Not only in his life, but in the history of the world. In human terms that is a terrible vision. Where is the good news in that? Yet for Jesus and his followers, the Cross will reveal Jesus' glory more fully than anything else. In our Prayers of the People for Lent we pray: *Give to Christian people everywhere the strength to take up the cross and to understand its mysterious glory.*

Jesus talks about death of self as a necessary condition to fuller life. This is a profound shift from anything in Greek philosophy: we remember Jesus' words are prompted by the arrival of Greeks.² There is nothing in Greek philosophy that teaches self-sacrifice as the heart of life and love. There is plenty in Greek drama of dying for a particular beloved as sometimes necessary and noble, but it is not seen as the heart of life's meaning on both sides of the grave. Jesus sees that love is the deepest meaning of life – not power or victory or wealth. Jesus teaches and then lives – that love in action is self-denial and self-offering for the well-being of the beloved. Self-sacrifice is how love reveals and deepens itself. Gladly offering ourselves for the needs of the beloved is the highest purpose in life. We could even say that the search for meaning in life is precisely the search for something worthy of such devotion and love. Jesus talks about sacrifice in its extreme form – dying to bring forth life. Yet offering ourselves in love for others needn't

² See William Temple: Readings in John's Gospel

always mean suffering. Sacrifice is whenever we choose something that we would not choose apart from love. The heart of a life-giving marriage is mutual love lived out in mutual self-sacrifice. When a whole community lives in mutual love and self-sacrifice we see the kingdom of God. That is what the church is for: to reveal God's kingdom in the way its members live out such love.

Jesus says: *When I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all people to myself.* He is talking of course of his dying on the Cross. How can a gruesome instrument of death draw anyone to God? It is shocking and surprising and new. Human beings will do their worst and God will not be defeated by it. God's mind will not be changed by our violence. Our hate cannot make God hate. Forgiveness will heal guilt. God is free from cycles of emotional exchange whereby we are nice to our friends and less nice to our not-friends. God is supremely free and in God's complete freedom God chooses to love even when we are murderous.³

When we want to know how God loves, we look to the Cross. It is empty today because that love cannot be suppressed. I believe that everyone is hungry for this unshakeable, resilient love which changes lives. When people look at the sins and brokenness of the church and Christians and use that as proof of the ridiculousness of Christianity, it shouldn't surprise or defeat us because *we* are not the proof test: Jesus is. Jesus doesn't expect us to *be* Jesus - but we do need to point to Jesus in every way we can for others. We don't need to dress good news up or

³ See Rowan Williams: *The Sign and the Sacrifice*

make it more impressive or “relevant”. It is already stunning in its reversal of most everything we think we know, and much of how the world operates. The Cross is relevant to school shootings and bridges collapsing and the myriad concerns on our hearts this morning. Justice is an essential step along the way but it is not the final goal of love for a Christian. This is the good news the world needs: to understand the Cross and its mysterious glory. To understand the power of the love shown on the Cross to end all cycles of violence and retribution and draw people together in the love of God. When we make choices that are patterned on Jesus, when we act in love no matter what, when we choose compassion over retribution, the world’s axis shifts towards heaven.

AMEN

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