

Sermon for Lent 5, Year B

The text: John 12:20-33

John's purpose in writing his Gospel is so that *all people* may believe in Jesus, and in believing, have life in his name. Right at the beginning, John says of Jesus: "In him was life, and that life was the light of *all* humankind" (John 1:4). John the Baptist testifies to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world*" (John 1:29). In what is probably the most well-known verse of the bible, John 3:16, Jesus says "God so *loved the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." In chapters 8 & 9 Jesus declares himself to be "The light of *the world*." In John 11, at Lazarus' death, Jesus promises Martha that *whoever* believes in him will never die (verse 26). Then in the verses just before our text, the Pharisees lament: "Look how the *whole world* has gone after him!" (John 12:19).

John shows that Jesus is the ultimate need of *all* people, not only those from Israel. The actual reality of that is seen in today's text. It is the time of the Passover festival, the great celebration commemorating God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, when he passed over their homes that were marked with the blood of sacrificed lambs, before leading them to freedom through the Red Sea. Thousands of people would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this celebration, to worship at the Temple.

Straight away John tells us that there were some Greeks among those going up to worship at the Passover festival. This is a vitally important point John wants to make for his Jewish audience, who held that, as the descendants of Abraham, they were the true people of God. While here were some known to be from other nations who revered the God of Israel (referred to as 'God-fearers') they had not gone through the rite of circumcision and consequently the Jews did not consider them to be full members of God's people. While they could visit Jerusalem for the great feasts, they were not permitted to pass beyond the outer court of the Gentiles when they went to the Temple.

There they were, those Greeks, among those going up to worship at the Passover festival. They come to Philip and they ask him: "Sir we wish to see Jesus". But they aren't just wanting to catch a glimpse of Jesus in the crowd. They are requesting an audience with Jesus; a personal meeting with him. Their request to Phillip is not made in a shy manner. The word John uses carries the sense of urgency; it is more like these Greeks *implore* Philip to be able to see Jesus. Perhaps they have heard

about the miraculous divine favour Jesus has shown so many people, and know him to be not only Israel's Saviour, but the Saviour of the world. It would seem the reason they want such an urgent audience with Jesus is because they have realised that Jesus is the Messiah that Israel's own Scriptures pointed to: '*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*' So, Phillip went to Andrew and told him, then they both went to Jesus, and told him.

The arrival of these Greeks into the scene is perfect timing and provides the perfect opportunity for Jesus to again declare his mission of saving the world: "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit" (verses 23-24).

"The hour has come"—a key phrase Jesus uses throughout John's Gospel to indicate that the time is near for some significant event to take place. "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified." How will Jesus be glorified? Not in any way that the world would think of glory, but by dying. Jesus says: "Truly, Truly, I say to you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it brings forth much fruit." Just as the grain which falls into the earth and dies brings much fruit, so also the Son of Man by dying will produce millions of children of God from all nations.

For us who hear these words thousands of years later, it's impossible to grasp the full impact and horror of what will happen in the following chapters. John brings the humanity of Jesus to the forefront—Jesus is troubled about what lies ahead. Yet even despite his anxiety about what will come next, Jesus was perfectly obedient to his Father's will for us: "Now, my soul is troubled. And what should I say? Father, save me from this hour? But on account of this I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'

The hour is near for Jesus to carry his own cross and be lifted up on it. That will be his coronation and enthronement; crowned with thorns, enthroned on a beam of wood. There God traded places with our sinful human race to free us from it, triumphing over death by his own death, and rescuing the world trapped in bondage to the ruler of this world, by shedding his holy and precious blood. Jesus is the new way God would 'pass over' his people in judgment—he is the Passover Lamb who was sacrificed once, for all.

Lifted up on the Cross, Jesus promised he would draw people from all nations to himself. The Greeks in our text who wish to see Jesus are among the first of those outside of Israel whom Jesus will draw to the Father. These Greeks who wanted to see Jesus came not just to the court of the Gentiles, but in the Person of Christ, they came to the holy of holies, the new Temple where the fullness of God's gracious

presence dwells, where all people, not just those from Israel, are able to meet with God and receive divine favour. I wonder if that's why the Greeks in our text are not identified in any way. By leaving them shrouded in obscurity, John gives an opportunity for all of those outside of Israel to place themselves in the text and say: "We wish to see Jesus". That includes us too.

Jesus' self-sacrificial love is for everybody. That's both a challenge for us and good news. It's a challenge because Jesus did not first seek the elite and rich or culturally popular. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He touched lepers. He freed instead of condemning a woman caught in adultery. He sought the vulnerable, the frail, the despairing; those who had absolutely nothing left in life. Jesus continues this drawing of people from all backgrounds to himself, continually associating with the unpopular, the outsiders, the vulnerable, the frail, the broken. As we live in a consumerist society which places a person's value—and worthiness of our love and commitment to them—on what they look like, what they can do, and what we can get out of them—there will always be the temptation to relate to people in these situations in the same way that the world does, rather than forgiving, welcoming and serving.

Yet we too were once foreigners to God's family, like the Greeks in our text. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul goes even further. He says we were not only foreigners but enemies to God, separated from him by sin. In our natural state we were just like the Pharisees unable to see Jesus as the Saviour we need, and we do not have a right to any preferential treatment from God based on our family heritage or the good works we have done in the church or anything about ourselves.

Which is why Jesus' being lifted high on the Cross is also good news for us, for if salvation was just for Israel we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be children of God, forgiven, washed, made holy, heirs of heaven and the promise of personal access to God and his peace. We would not have an audience with the Creator of the universe who promises to hear our prayers for Jesus' sake. But salvation is beyond Israel to Greece and all the corners of the globe, even right here as we gather in this building. The hour has come again. The time has come for you to again see Jesus and have an audience with him.

In the Person of Christ, we have progressed past the outer court of the Gentiles and have come to the Holy of Holies. He is here to meet us, serve us and bless us. He is here to see us, listen to us, and look upon us with divine favour and blessing. He is here with the same divine help that he gave to all those in the Gospels. He is here to forgive our sins, bless us and teach us.

The hour has come. Jesus is here to bring all the saving benefits of his death and resurrection for the world, to us. There will be no change of heart by God. No going back on his promise. Jesus has already died and risen from the dead, and through our baptism he has drawn us to himself, so that no matter what happens in the week ahead, Jesus' Heavenly Father is ours also, and for Jesus' sake we have peace from him and every good and perfect gift from above. Amen!