

Seeing Jesus

Readings: John 12:20-33(NIV) & Hebrews 5:5-10(NIV)

Our sentence for today: “We would see Jesus,” is very special for me. The church I went to as a young teenager had these words inscribed on the pulpit; not on the front where everyone could see, but at the back where only the preacher could see. So, every time they went up into the pulpit to preach these words “Sir, we would see Jesus” would act as a reminder to them, and I pray that today we will see Jesus as we look at the Bible passages that were read to us.

We all see the world slightly differently. Have a look at this picture (an optical illusion). What do you see? Some of you may have seen a beautiful young woman; some of you may have seen an old woman. Look at it again and see if you can see what you didn't see before.

Jesus is a bit like that – we all tend to see Him a bit differently. Often surveys done among the general population find that: “Jesus is cool, but Church is not.” This is a report of a survey done in Dunedin about nine years ago. People generally had a very positive perception of Jesus. The researchers found that people thought that:

Jesus was someone who is gracious, and fun to hang out with, who would come out partying, who would not be judgmental. He would be everyone's best friend, a really cool guy.

I am not saying Jesus wouldn't be like that, but it is only part of the picture – a bit like only seeing the young woman and not the old one or vice versa. Several years ago J. B. Phillips wrote a book called *Your God is Too Small* and sometimes our picture of Jesus can be either too small or a bit lopsided – focused on one aspect rather than having a fuller or deeper picture of the Jesus we follow.

So, what I want to do today is to see what more we can find out about Jesus by looking at the two passages we had read to us, particularly John 12:20-33. Keep in mind too that our readings during Lent are leading up to the Easter story of Jesus' death and resurrection. If you have your Bible with you turn to John 12:20 which is where we will start.

First we need to put this incident into its context. It takes place in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover festival. The city streets were crowded with all the extra people, up to 2 million according to Josephus. Jesus Himself is still attracting large crowds. It was probably only a day or so after His triumphal entry into the city, which we remember on Palm Sunday. The Pharisees were wondering what on earth to do about Him. v19 says:

“See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after Him!”

V20. So our passage begins: “Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival.” John is being really ironic here: the Pharisees were talking about the ‘whole world’ and now some Greeks turn up! They weren't necessarily from Greece; the word is used in the NT for Gentiles generally, anyone who wasn't a Jew. They were Greek-speaking Gentiles but the fact that they had come to Jerusalem especially for the festival suggests that they were God-fearers – people who were attracted to the Jewish faith but

were not official converts. They couldn't take part in the festival itself but they may have visited the Temple and seen the wall separating the Court of the Gentiles from the Inner Courts with the notice warning them to go no further on pain of death. It is just possible too that they might have been there when Jesus threw out the traders and upended the tables of the money changers.

“My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers!” he said.

Now the Greeks wanted to see and speak to Jesus in person, to find out more about Him.

V21 – 22. So they approached Philip, who had a Greek name and came from an area where Greek was widely spoken, remember Jesus was probably speaking Aramaic. Philip went to Andrew then together they went to Jesus. We are not told whether Jesus met with the Greeks or not. He certainly doesn't talk to them directly but instead responds with a rather cryptic statement.

V23 “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified”

It is as though the coming of the Greeks has brought things to a head. “The hour has come,” Jesus says. Previously in John 2:4; 4:21, 23; 7:30; 8:20, the hour had not come but now the time has finally arrived. One commentator (Carson) says:

... the approach of the Greeks is *for Jesus* a kind of trigger, a signal that the climactic hour has dawned.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

What do you think the disciples, the crowd or the Greeks made of that?

What do you think Jesus meant?

Let's unpack it a bit.

The Son of Man is how Jesus often referred to himself, but it was a title that came with a bit of baggage. It was first used in Daniel 7:13 to describe one who would be given power and authority and a kingdom that would be worldwide and last forever. In between the Old and New Testaments, Jewish writings focussed on this heroic conqueror sent by God to establish a universal Jewish kingdom and usher in a new golden age. Was that what Jesus meant when he talked about being glorified? Can you imagine the excitement of the crowd, was Jesus going to lead them in this campaign of victory? Maybe what they saw when they looked at Jesus was an all-conquering Messiah.

But Jesus did not mean by 'glorified' what they did, and what He said next must have left them feeling totally bewildered – it was a major let-down for them.

From v24 onwards it is clear that the 'hour' Jesus is talking about is the 'hour' of His death. He describes it as being like the grain of wheat that has to fall to the ground and die before it can produce a new plant which will yield many more seeds. Jesus is **the** kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies to bring life to us and all His followers.

Jesus also talks about 'being lifted up' which people then would easily recognize as referring to the Roman method of execution, crucifixion, a very cruel way to die. John is

deliberately choosing a phrase that has a double meaning – physically Jesus will be lifted up when He is nailed to the cross, and metaphorically he will be lifted up or exalted. Maybe John had in mind Isaiah 52:13 where we are told that God's Servant "will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted." – In the Greek translation of the OT 'highly exalted' is exactly the same word ('doxasthesetai') that John uses for 'glorified.' John wants us to see not only the shame and suffering of the cross but also the cross as the place of Jesus' glorification.

It is at the cross that Jesus is shown to be the fully obedient Son of God who faithfully accomplishes His mission – what he has been sent to do. That is why on the cross He can cry out, "It is finished!" (Jn 19:30). It is this complete obedience that has made it possible for God to reveal Himself through Jesus' ministry.

We need to remember also that it is an obedience that comes from love – Jesus' love for the Father and for us. Our obedience too should be the result of our love for Him. Jesus said: "if you love me, keep my commandments." (Jn 14:15)

We find a similar combination of obedience, suffering and glory in Paul's letter to the Philippians:

"And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross.
Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every other name." (Philippians 2:8-9)

Similarly in Hebrews 5:7-8 we read:

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death, and he was heard because of His reverent submission. Son though He was, He learned obedience through what He suffered."

The writer of Hebrews also describes Jesus Christ as our High Priest who offered not animal sacrifices for the sins of the people, but Himself:

Hebrews 10:10

"... we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."
... "a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." as it says in the old Communion service.

Hebrews 5:9 "... He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him."

So, the 'hour' of His suffering and death finds Jesus prepared, because He has lived for no other purpose than the complete offering of himself to God.

Now we can begin to understand what is going on in v27. This is, if you like, John's equivalent of the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is dreading what is to come, as a fully human flesh and blood being He feels revulsion and horror at what lies ahead. "What shall I say? Father save me from this hour? No! it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name." And then comes the voice from heaven giving assurance that the Father who has been glorifying His name throughout Jesus' ministry can be counted on to continue glorifying His name as Jesus takes this final step of obedience.

In John 12:29 the crowd don't hear the voice. Some dismiss it as thunder; others are a bit closer to the mark and think an angel has spoken. Yet Jesus says the voice was for their benefit and not His. Why for their benefit? Because even if they could not understand what was said, the sound of a thunderous voice from heaven should have alerted them to the fact that something very significant was going on, and in vv 31 and 32 Jesus explains what this is.

V31 Now, writes John, is a decisive time - for two reasons. Firstly because the death of Jesus on the cross is a time of judgement on the world. We can look back to John 3:18-19 to see what John means by this – he is not so much looking forward to the Last Judgement but saying it is our response to Jesus that is the basis of the judgement. Are we among those who are drawn to the cross and the way of life it stands for, or do we reject it and all it stands for?

Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth says that Christ crucified is a stumbling block for the Jews – It is not what they expected – while for the Greek world, and for many people today, it is plain foolishness.

Secondly, Jesus says in v 32 that his death on the cross will draw all people, that is all kinds of people, to himself, Jews and Gentiles. Maybe this is part of Jesus' response to the Greeks. Not then, but after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, Gentile God-fearers, like Cornelius in Acts, will be able to become followers of Christ and part of the new people of God.

This is also the time when the ruler, or prince of this world, Satan, will be driven out. It is not Jesus, the one who will soon be hanging on the cross who is defeated and cast out but the 'rulers of this age' who are 'done away with.'

In Colossians 2:15 we read:

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

In the book of Revelation the churches in Asia Minor were suffering persecution, but John is taken behind the scenes, as it were to see what is really going on. He sees a vision of the glorious ascended Christ - but later in the book Christ is identified as the Lamb who was slain (Rev 5:6). The angels praise Him singing: (Rev 5:12)

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and praise.”

Or as we say in one of our Communion services:

Lamb who was slain has begun His reign. Hallelujah!

Suffering and glory are combined on the cross.

You may have noticed as we went through this passage that I missed out a couple of verses vv25 and 26. One of the reasons for re-examining our picture of Jesus is that we are called to follow Him, so that the way He lived becomes the pattern for how we should live.

In these verses Jesus challenges us not to 'love' our lives in the present age so much that we lose out on eternal life in the age to come. Where do we focus our time and effort?

William Barclay talks about people who 'hoard' their lives, taking things easy, avoiding strain and stress, sitting by the fire and molly-coddling themselves. Barclay says if we do this no doubt we will *exist* longer – but we will never *live*. Note I am not talking about proper care of ourselves, of course we must do that. He contrasts that with Joan of Arc who, when she realized her enemies were getting stronger, prayed: I shall only last a year, use me as you can."

For the Greeks in Jesus' day the goal of human existence was self-fulfilment and personal maturity. What do you think the peoples' goals are today? Self-fulfilment or satisfaction; security; material comfort; the latest mobile phone or adrenaline rush experience, fame etc.

Jesus makes it clear that we serve Him by following Him, by following His pattern of whole-hearted obedience, no matter what.

But the result of dying to self in this life is honour and reward in the age to come. Sacrifice and glory are inextricably linked.

We have been looking at our picture of Jesus. We started by saying that our picture of Him may be unbalanced or incomplete and so we tried to see what picture of Jesus emerges from our reading in John 12:20-33. What we found was someone who was far more than 'the cool guy who was everyone's best friend.'

He was the Son of Man who came to live and die in total obedience to His Father's will.

He is the Lamb who was slain whose victory over evil came not by force of arms but by the cross.

He is the one who call us to follow Him by choosing to serve Him even when it means dying to our own selfish desires.

Sometimes it is good to remind ourselves of these truths, and especially as we approach the Easter season.

I want to finish with some images that remind us how real these truths are for some of our Christian brothers and sisters.

You may have seen this picture on the News of these Egyptian Christians beheaded for their faith. Before one of the young men was killed, he said, *ya Rabbi Yesua*, "oh, my Lord Jesus."

This icon [on Anglican Diocese of Egypt we site] illustrates what we have been talking about today.

Let us in a moment of silence consider what God might be saying to us.

We would see Jesus. Open our eyes to see You, Lord, and open our hearts to love and serve you who died on the cross that we might live. Amen