

Great St Mary's Cambridge: Sermon: 17 MArch 24 (Lent 5)

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Jeremiah 31.31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Hebrews 5.5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

'You are my Son,
today I have begotten you';
as he says also in another place,
'You are a priest for ever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.'

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

John 12.20-33

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

27 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

²⁶*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*

‘We want to see Jesus’. John’s gospel gives us some very good questions and this is one of them.

If somebody comes to us and says ‘I want to see Jesus’ how would you respond? How would we introduce them to Jesus? One way is to introduce people to the Bible, and in order for this not to become an overwhelming experience, I would give them a copy just of Mark’s gospel, the shortest of the gospels, first to be written, well paced with a strong sense of immediacy.

And, of course, you would start a conversation, and I am struck that in today’s gospel reading, Philip and Andrew, both with Greek names, from Galilee, the region with the biggest Greek speaking population are the ones who are approached. We find it easier to ask those questions of people with whom we have something in common with. But, the main reason they are approached, is, of course, that they are seen to be followers of Jesus. So, having been asked the question, having introduced them to Bible, where would we go with our conversation? Where do we see Jesus most clearly?

In our gospel reading this morning, from John’s gospel, Jesus uses the Greeks’ request ‘we want to see Jesus’ as an opportunity to go right to the heart of who he is and what he is about. Jesus is already in Jerusalem, for the Passover festivities, having been greeted by the great crowd, many of whom knew that he had raised Lazarus from the dead. Can you imagine yourself in that crowd - you are a visitor who has come for the festivities and hear people talking about this Jesus and what he has done. Expectations were flying very high.

In this wonderful gospel passage – please, do take it home and keep praying with it, Jesus goes to the heart of his mission and calling. He re-defines the meaning of ‘glory’ as he speaks about the place of suffering, in particular the one who suffers on behalf of others. His answer to Andrew, Philip and all who are listening is to say’

‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Glory is an important word in John’s gospel – we find it at the start of his gospel, in the prologue, John 1.14 *‘And the Word has become flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth’*. In Jesus, we see God’s glory in human form, and now, as we are moving into Passiontide, we face the mystery that this glory is seen most fully in the crucifixion and resurrection. ²⁴*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* And that fruit born by Jesus is described in verse ³²*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’*

Let me return to the opening question: we want to see Jesus.

I was fortunate to grow up in a church with good liturgy and teaching, in which Holy Week was observed with the special church services we offer here at Great St Mary's, too. Looking back, those Holy Week experiences left a deep impression on me, shaping my relationship with Jesus and my understanding of God. To this day, if anybody asks me how I make sense of the Christian faith, in the light of the history of the Church and the world, with all its suffering, I say I make sense of the Christian faith because of the cross. The fact that at the heart of our faith is the Son of God, who gave his life for us, to be lifted up from the earth on the cross. As Jesus declares in John's gospel, thereby drawing all people to himself.

As a newly ordained priest, serving in a parish in East London, I encountered the reality and suffering that is part of all human communities; it is part of this church family and – very acutely, with those who are ministering in places like Israel and Gaza at this time, suffering-with and for, in a way that goes beyond human comprehension.

During my curacy I often wondered, how I could preach the good news of the love of God when parishioners, their children or grand-children were sick and dying far too young, when the question of how does a God of love allow this, came up time and time again.

Where did I see Jesus? I saw Jesus in the faith and love of our faithful parishioners, whose lives had held their fair share of suffering, whose faith had been severely tested and refined through their suffering. One family stands out, Kath and Roy, who lost two daughters and a grand-son to cancer, the grand-son shortly before I arrived. Kath and Roy were long-standing members of the church and were well supported by the clergy and lay people through the years of their daughters illness and death. My husband was the vicar at the time when the grand-son, Kevin, became ill with leukaemia and it was clear that he was going to die. Kevin asked if Martin could come and see him. He wanted to talk with him about dying. Aged 18, in year 13 at school, he asked about what to expect about, what it would be like, who would be there – the kind of questions an 18 year old thinks about when they prepare to leave home to go to College. Whilst Martin could not answer the questions about dying and heaven -none of us can, he tried to reassure Kevin and talk about what he believes, about what we can say about God, which primarily comes from our knowledge of Jesus. After the visit, Kevin's parents said the conversation had been a great help; Kevin was at peace and he died two weeks later. What made that conversation possible? Kevin, aged 18, had a faith where he knew that death was not the end. He had a faith based in the events we mark in Holy Week – the terrible journey Jesus and his disciples make, the disciples asking questions, too.

For people like Kath, Roy, Kevin's parents and siblings, being people of faith does not take away pain, the grief, the questions, but underneath all the pain is 'that peace which the world cannot give', the presence of God', which we may not be aware of at the time, which allows God to do the healing work inside. Roy died in the first year of my curacy, and Martin and I were with him and the family at his bedside when he died.

Kath carried on, bereft, courageous, supported by her remaining family and the church. One day she came to me, with a big smile on her face, saying: when I was walking the dog today, in our local park, praying, I heard a voice that said 'all is well'. There was no one else there. It gave me such a sense of peace. I think I will be alright. Kath is still alive, amazingly living in Suffolk, where Martin is now the Bishop.

'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. The church makes a point of observing Passiontide and Holy Week because the deepest truth is, that we only see Jesus through his death and resurrection. We see the reality and glory of Jesus in the lives of faithful people around us, who serve and follow him, just as I saw it in the lives of Kath and Roy and their family.

As we journey together, with Jesus through this Passiontide, however big or small our faith, whatever our questions – Jesus says to us, too: whoever serves me, the Father will honour. Amen.

The Collect and Post Communion prayer for Lent 5:

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Post Communion

Lord Jesus Christ,
you have taught us
that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters
we do also for you:
give us the will to be the servant of others
as you were the servant of all,
and gave up your life and died for us,
but are alive and reign, now and for ever.