

# *we wish to see Jesus*

a sermon preached on the

## *fifth sunday in lent*

18 March 2018

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by father ken hewlett*

the lections: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119: 9-16; Hebrews 5: 5-14; John 12: 20-33.

We are poised at one of those watersheds in the Christian Year, when the course of Lent begins to turn to the passion of our Lord and to contemplate the coming pain of the cross. The older ones of us will remember this Sunday as Passion Sunday according to the Book of Common Prayer. It is a slightly enigmatic time, however: we are not yet in Holy Week and we are still seven days from the joy, albeit short lived, of the Palm Sunday crowds. In this gathering anticipation there is a sense of something significant beginning to unfold.

Today's gospel reading, however, begins innocuously enough. Some foreigners want to meet Jesus. Now if the headline had read, 'Iranian sect stalk Jewish rabbi' then perhaps our attention might have been grabbed. But John knows nothing of tabloid journalism; instead like a great artist; he prefers to create a picture in which the seemingly ordinary detail holds great significance. 'Now among those who went up to worship at the festival there were some Greeks.' Greeks?

John is not an idle writer. He doesn't record what happens simply to fill up a page; he only records what has significance for his great picture. He is not making points about Jewish and Hellenistic culture, but rather about the Greek's realisation that they too, need salvation. And they realise that this salvation from God is to be found in Jesus. Hence their request: 'Sir we wish to see Jesus.' What request could be simpler? Yet it is also profound. Earlier in the gospel Jesus had told Nicodemus that the son of man must be lifted up from the earth much in the same way as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness. The idea was that when the Israelites who had been bitten by poisonous snakes looked at this bronze image, God would give them healing. Salvation-healing came by seeing with faith. And now in the ministry of Jesus, these Greek visitors also know that salvation comes by seeing Jesus, meeting him with faith.

Poor Greeks! For all their faith, their tact and diplomacy, their courage and their boldness—for all this we yet do not know if ever they met Jesus, I suspect the reason for this is that it does not matter. For John, seeing and believing is not a matter of physically seeing and then inwardly believing [Thomas makes a pig's ear of this kind of approach later.] But rather of believing and therefore 'seeing' – Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

While we do not see John's Greek visitors having an interview with Jesus, their quest does open the way for Jesus to give the new teaching about his coming death and to cast fresh light on the nature of being a disciple; the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. The gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke portray Jesus as the great storyteller in the parables they record. John chooses not to use those parables but there is one exception in great drama of today's gospel reading; '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'. This is the glorification of the Son of Man. This is how Jesus will fulfil his Father's will, how he will become the Saviour of the world. And as such, his life, his obedience, his way of doing God's will—selfless even in suffering—is the pattern he establishes for his disciples: 'Whoever serves me must follow me.'

The Greeks who came to see Jesus have now become superfluous as John moves to portray Jesus giving profound teaching that quickly turns into prayer and then conversation and finally declaration. There is no more reference to the visitors; but we should perhaps imagine them in the background, listening as we listen, glimpsing the way of salvation for the world.

There are many contrasts that can be made between John's gospel account and those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The characters involved and the manner of Jesus teaching being just two of such differences. And we are about to encounter a third, quite startling difference; on the night before he died, according to the first three gospel accounts Jesus went into the garden of Gethsemane to pray which he did with great physical and emotional anguish, his agony precipitated by the knowledge that he would soon suffer betrayal, humiliation, torture and death. His trauma is so deep that we are told that an angel appeared in order to minister to him. Perhaps we should not be too surprised that John, again, is different. He does record Jesus and his disciples going out into a garden that night, but the anguished prayer is not recorded; on entering the garden, Judas the traitor also arrives and Jesus is handed over to the local authorities. It is not that John is insensitive to Jesus' suffering, but rather he is showing that Jesus is in command, the one alone of all the characters who understands what is happening and knows all that is in the Father's will.

There is a glimpse in John's account of how the others portray Gethsemane. We hear Jesus declaring, 'Now is my soul 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. Father glorify your name': very similar to Jesus' wrestling with the Father's will, his cup of suffering, in the garden. Again, as in Gethsemane, there is a time of strengthening for Jesus; not here a ministering spirit but a voice that comes to reassure him. We know it is the voice of the Father—but the crowds say it was thunder or an angel.

If this is a glimpse of Gethsemane put into a different frame, the heavenly voice says Jesus, was not for his sake, but for the benefit of all who were with him, that seeing him they might understand him and believe in him. Whatever the Greeks made of it we have no idea; again, it does not matter because the focus is on Jesus and the current participants; and that includes ourselves as involved observers. 'Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out,' says the Lord. And I recall again that episode with Moses exalting the bronze snake in the wilderness; 'when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself'. John tells us that he said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die for nothing was hidden from Jesus' knowledge. And we might add that Jesus was also indicating by this context that 'all people' means everyone, Greeks included.

We began with a simple but profound request from a group of sympathetic foreigners to see Jesus. The episode continued with an increasing revelation of the extent of Jesus' obedience to the Father, and the purpose of his suffering. In all this Jesus was creating a standard for our discipleship, too. We ended with a sense of anticipating some of the action of Gethsemane, albeit told from a different perspective. That agony in the Garden would lead Jesus directly to the cross, to his physical exaltation. But moreover that exaltation would itself be the means of greatest revelation so that those with eyes of faith would be drawn to him who is Saviour of the world. How right, therefore, that in his dying hours the proclamation 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' should be written for all to see in Hebrew, Latin and Greek.

Sir, we wish to see Jesus.