

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Lent 5-B (21 March 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2021-03-20 Sat 13:36>

Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33, Psalm 51:1-13

1 Sir, we wish to see Jesus.

*The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!' Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'*¹

Our Gospel Reading this morning describes what happened immediately after the triumphal entry, what we call "Palm Sunday," when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a colt. Because next Sunday we'll be reading the Passion story so that those who are unable to attend church mid-week will have the whole story leading up to Easter. Because you can't get to resurrection without passing through crucifixion. So instead today we hear what happened at the triumphal entry, after Jesus dismounted from the donkey and sent it back to its owner.

What happens is that some of the religious leaders with whom Jesus was most closely affiliated (perhaps those who saw themselves as competitors?) complained about all the attention he was getting. They said, "Look, the whole world has gone after them!" And then our Gospel writer, with a wicked sense of humor, goes on in the very next sentence to tell the story of some Greeks at this Jewish festival. "Greek" is short-hand for "not a Jew": in other words, representatives of the rest of the world's people who had also come to Jerusalem for this Jewish festival, attracted by the God they saw their Jewish friends and neighbors worshiping. The religious leaders are jealous because, instead of just being dazzled by the temple or looking up more accredited teachers, these Greeks go to Philip and Andrew, untutored country bumpkins from Galilee who were known to hang out with Jesus, and say "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

2 A Turning Point

Our Gospel account leaves open the question of whether our Greek friends actually got to see Jesus. Because Jesus seems to acknowledge their presence as a turning point in his own life and ministry. Immediately, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Immediately Jesus begins speaking of his death and of the fruit, the abundant results, that death will bring. Immediately Jesus calls those who already know him to a deeper level of discipleship, to a readiness to follow Jesus into the death that always comes before resurrection.

¹Jn 12.19-21

Now, says Jesus, now is the judgment of this world. Jesus' death is judgment. Not judgment of the Greeks. Not judgment of the Jews. But judgment of "the ruler of this world," the one responsible for the terrible things we experience in this world. Now is the judgment for those spirits, those forces, and yes, those people, who hurt, who exclude, who perpetrate injustice, who discriminate against you. Now is the judgment on the easy purchase of murder weapons and the misguided slaughter of fellow-human beings such as we saw in Atlanta this week. Jesus in his death was hurt, was excluded from the society of the living, was subject to grave injustice and violence, and was discriminated against because of his race, his beliefs, and, who knows, perhaps even because he flouted sexual norms by being a marriageable young man who declined to get married and fulfill the *mitzvah*, and the social expectation to have children. Jesus is lifted up, says our Gospel writer, by being hung on the cross, lynched by a quasi-judicial proceeding that was more beholden to the passions of the mob than to dispassionate justice. And as Jesus is lifted up, Jesus' own unquenchable life passes judgment on all the forces arrayed against him, judgment because those forces will fail to have the final word.

As Jesus is lifted up, true to his own prediction and the fears of the religious leaders, all the world is drawn to him. Because Jesus provides an answer to pain. Jesus provides an answer to exclusion, injustice, and discrimination. Jesus provides an answer to inequality. Jesus provides an answer to all the things that hurt you, break your heart, threaten your family, and make you feel helpless and alone. Jesus is present with you in that suffering, and Jesus leads the way into a resurrected life that passes judgment on and transcends every evil.

3 Losing life will save it

Jesus said, as long as that grain of wheat clings to the stalk, holding on with clenched fists, that grain of wheat is useless. It's just hanging in the breeze, suffering and accomplishing nothing. But as soon as it lets go, releases itself into the loving breath of God, it is delivered into the nurturing ground and then bears abundant fruit. So long as we hang onto life, hang on to vanity and pride, keep hold of wealth and status and possession, we cannot produce fruit, so we are likewise barren.

Our baptism was a beginning sign of that letting go, that surrender into the loving arms of God, through death and into resurrection. As we continue to live into our baptisms, we learn to turn loose of those things that hold us back, that cause us to stumble, those ways that even you and I participate in the violence by which we hurt one another and hurt ourselves. As the community of the baptized, we learn instead how to be carried aloft by the warming currents of God's eternal life, replacing old habits of thought, attitude, and action with new ones that reflect Jesus' way of being in the world. That is what church is all about!

If nothing else, Lent is the season where we join in the general cry, "Lord, we want to see Jesus." And if the Greeks in our Gospel story today didn't get an answer right away, that's because the question was left open. Jesus knew that in being lifted up on the cross, he would draw all persons to himself. We stand among those Greeks who came to the festival, wanting and waiting to see Jesus. We, too, are a sign of Jesus' mission being fulfilled. As Jesus was lifted up on the cross, it was with the purpose of drawing all people – even you and me – to himself. Jesus was lifted up so that he might lead all of us right through death, through pain, through violence, through everything that is wrong in our worlds, and finally into the light, sure and eternal, of the resurrected life.

Amen.

4 Gospel Reading: John 12.19-33

The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

'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. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.