

“We wish to see Jesus”

a sermon for The Fifth Sunday in Lent, 21 March 2021

*for St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Hamilton, NY; and St. Paul & the Redeemer Episcopal Church, Chicago, Illinois
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“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Dang! After 374 days since the shutdown began, we just wish to see our neighbors. Jesus can wait!

Today's gospel pericope—this little cutting of scripture—gave me *agita*, not on its own, but in its resistance to illumination. I don't preach very often, but when I have in recent years, inspiration came easily: I easily thought of an evocative image or event that clarified the text and provided a compelling narrative.

This time, Miss Holy Spirit has been abstemious with inspiration, and my initial response was sardonic:

These Greeks ask to see Jesus, and rather than granting them an audience, he slips into another of his repetitive whingings about how misunderstood and unaccepted he is. “Oh, if only you people would just believe in me!” Alas, spinning out such a theology isn't going to win anyone to the faith. There must be more here than my amateurish reading revealed.

I'm a bit of a liturgical-calendar nerd. One of my favorite classes at Yale Divinity School was called “Word in Worship”, and explored the history and creation of lectionaries, liturgical texts and liturgical calendars. Among my most vivid memories was our look at the construction of Lenten lectionaries leading up to Holy Week. Churchy Geekdom.

The lectionary for Lent was crafted to provide didactic and inspirational material for those who were considering joining the Church, and those who needed to be drawn back in. For centuries, in Lent, Jesus' greatest words and acts have been proclaimed in Sunday and weekday readings: his triumph over Satan in his temptation in the desert, casting out of demons, restoring sight to the blind, feeding the five thousand, raising Lazarus from the dead, and promise of everlasting life to those who keep his word. Different churches have selected different readings through the years, but generally they are chosen carefully to point us toward Easter, and to make the case for a life of faith. Jesus' greatest acts and utterances were reserved for these last days before Easter to assure catechumens (that is, those who had spent roughly two years preparing themselves for baptism and reception into Christ's Church) that they were making the right choice to complete this spiritual journey. Lent was also a season of fasting and penitence for all the faithful to prepare to receive communion at the Paschal Feast, especially those who had been excommunicated for sin during the previous year, and could be “recommunicated” at Easter, but also for the laity as a whole, who communed infrequently. In fact, by 1215, the Church had to admonish them to commune once a year, at Easter.

Therefore, the Fifth Sunday in Lent has historically been important, because it has been the Church's last day to make its argument for adhering to Jesus before Holy Week.

Holy Week is, of course, the liturgical heart of our faith, belief, and practice, but it is doubly important because, in earlier centuries, its liturgical remembrances culminated in baptisms that happened only once annually, during the great Paschal liturgy, the one now styled as The Great Vigil of Easter. On the fifth and final Sunday in Lent, the catechumens would be standing at the threshold of a new life.

Even knowing all this, I still was not sure why this particular pericope is appointed for today (I confess to a relative biblical ignorance.), so I read all of chapter 12, and the first thing this extra context revealed is that the Greeks' request to see Jesus immediately follows Jesus dining at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had previously raised from the dead. A great crowd had gathered at their home to see Jesus and the resurrected Lazarus, and the chief priests and the Pharisees were frustrated and threatened by their flocking to Jesus and Lazarus. Verse

19 reads, “The Pharisees then said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!’” Imagine *that* spat!

The whole world has gone after him. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus had said that it would be through the Son of God that the world would be saved (3.17), and Samaritans, who had heard about the Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus, “are convinced that he is the Savior of the world” (4.42). John reports that these Greeks are the first non-Jews to seek out Jesus, as Jesus had earlier invited two of John the Baptist’s disciples to “come and see”, and as the Samaritan woman had invited her fellow townspeople to “[c]ome and see (Jesus).”

Lent 5. “Come and see” is the “royal invitation” to us, by extension. “We wish to see Jesus”, “the Savior of the world”. Shall we, twenty-first century sheep, also enter the sheepfold and into the care of the good shepherd?

Also previously lost on me was how this moment is the hinge between Jesus’ public ministry and the arrival of his “hour”, as he declares in verse 23. Jesus had successfully evaded the authorities, and they had failed repeatedly to capture and execute him, because his hour had not yet come. The world, as represented by these Greek seekers, has finally reached Jesus, and with it, the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified.

I need to beg the forbearance of those for whom these details are obvious. There are some among us who easily identify these important moments, understanding their significance to the Christian story and to their own faith journey. I am embarrassed by my own ignorance, so still feeling in the dark, I reread the entire gospel, because I couldn’t remember what it was I needed to commit to to gain eternal life. It had been a long time since I had read it straight through. I’m in church weekly, and John’s gospel is sprinkled throughout our three-year lectionary, but rarely is it heard in continuity, unlike the three other, “synoptic” gospels, each of which has its own year of focus. Thus, I’m familiar with many snippets of John, but the overall narrative arc eluded me.

I remember that John reads differently from Mark, Matthew and Luke, but I had forgotten how very differently Jesus appears here. The first semester of Introduction to the New Testament had covered the synoptics and Acts, and when we first gathered in the lecture hall for the opening lecture of the second semester of New Testament, the lights dimmed, the screen rolled down, and we were shown the scene from the movie *Contact* in which Jodi Foster encounters her father—or aliens who appear as her father—on the beach. The message: Jesus as portrayed by John is alien to us: distant, mysterious, a riddle. Who he is and what he offers are different. What does he ask of us?

Though John’s gospel may be harder to read and absorb than the others’, maybe its message is more pure and refined. What must we do to earn eternal life? Over and over, Jesus asks us to believe in him, and in the one who sent him, and now that his hour has come, Jesus will give us a new commandment, through service and teaching and companionship and self-sacrifice: “love one another as I have loved you”. It is laid before us in our Holy Week liturgies, through footwashing and death and resurrection, and elsewhere in John’s gospel, particularly beginning with chapter 13. How well and often do we embody this commandment? I need to hear it repeatedly, especially when I am ruled by self-centeredness, or anger, or lack of charity. Perhaps you, too, would like your memory of it refreshed and clarified. If you’re fuzzy on John’s gospel, as was I before this week, may I suggest reading it as part of your Easter preparations? In my bible, chapter 13 to the end fills fewer than ten pages. We could easily waste the little time needed on needless distractions.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” With John as our guide, let’s “come and see”.