

Search for the Spiritual
John 12:20-36
March 21, 2021

I cannot remember ever having a strong desire “to see Jesus”. It simply wasn’t a spiritual question that was ever raised in my young head. Yes, I did attend Sunday School, but my family had only a peripheral interest in church, the bible, or Jesus. Like so many today, my family, including parents and siblings, lived out their lives with little regard for or interest in Jesus, God, or the spiritual. This is where a huge majority of our fellow Canadians live today-outside any connection to the religious institutions that perhaps their grandparents once belong to. Yes, they would claim, without apology, that they are spiritual, but decidedly not religious.

David Lose, in his reflection for this Sunday’s reading, reminds us that over the past thirty years a huge shift has taken place in society. Back in the 70’s polls showed that people generally said they were religious but not spiritual. Today the same polls show the opposite results: people say they are spiritual but not religious. In short, they are no longer connected to, or interested in, religious institutions.

But my guess is that this belief in spirituality is alive inside our fellow citizens, yet perhaps hidden deep within us. They may never confess that they are interested in “seeing Jesus”, but I believe in each one of us there is a profound yearning for the spiritual. It may be unconscious, it may be buried deep within our psyche, and it may be expressed in other ways than traditional religion. But that spiritual hunger was put there at our creation by a God who loved us. The truth is that each person has planted deep within us a spiritual centre. We are all open to God and the spiritual! On what basis do I think that?

Well, **first**, because I experienced this shift myself. And **second**, like Nicodemus, afraid, sceptical, hesitant, when he sought Jesus out that night, by the end of the Gospel he found his way into Jesus' fellowship. The question is how do we help our friends, family, neighbours, find their way to this spiritual awakening? How do we encourage them to open themselves to God through Jesus the Christ? Because we are made in God's image this is the connection we must trust. Namely, that down deep, we are all seeking the spiritual connection to God. We may not be conscious of this search but God has put it inside all of us.

And all of this to say that these Greeks from the diaspora, these Jewish believers on their way to Passover, were also intrigued by Jesus' reputation. They wished to see Jesus. So they asked Philip who then went to Andrew, who then both went to Jesus. But they never did see Jesus, did they? Instead, Jesus answered their request with a discourse on the meaning of his approaching death.

But for context we need to remember what happened six days prior to this. Jesus was sitting at table in the home of Lazarus, the one he had raised from the tomb. Mary anointed Jesus with costly perfume which drew the ire of Judas who complained about the waste of money. Jesus responded that they should leave her alone because she had saved this for his burial. All was quiet, peaceful, and intimate. But the pace quickens when a great crowd learned that Jesus was eating with Lazarus. That drew them like flies. Recognizing the influence Lazarus had on the people the chief priests set out to get rid of both of them. All this is followed by the entry into Jerusalem to great crowds and noise, hosanna and palm branches. At which point the religious leaders exclaimed in horror, **Look, the whole world has gone after him.** His popularity had sealed his doom!

So, from the quiet, intimate dinner table, Jesus has moved into the bustle and noise of the crowds going up to the Passover festival. He is hard to get close to. So it is natural that these Greeks would seek out two of the disciples (both who have Greek names) to intercede for them.

It is interesting to me that the Old Testament reading for this Sunday is so apparently discordant with John. Jeremiah lived during the national crisis in Israel. The Babylonians had reduced to Jerusalem to rubble, many of the population, including the leaders, were taken into captivity where they will remain for seventy years. Jeremiah, witnessing all of this, writes these words: **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...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. (Jeremiah 31:31ff)**

How is this related to these Greeks seeing Jesus, you ask. Good question! To answer this, we need to reflect on Jesus' discourse that follows the request to see him. He speaks about the death that awaits him. He explains it with an agricultural metaphor: **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.** His death will result in a huge crop of people who find life.

Mark Davis reflects on the word, "glorify". He suggests that the best way of understanding what the verb "glorify" means is that Jesus dies, not to appease God's anger over our sins, but because his death will draw all people, like these Greeks, to God. Archbishop Oscar Romero found great consolation in this verse when his own life was threatened and, many of his followers,

more so on his assassination. Tertullian, the church father captured it well in the phrase, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Christ’s death will draw people to God. Certainly, for me this could not be a truer statement, especially from one who had no skin in the game of any religious involvement.

His death and resurrection will also challenge the status quo of Roman and imperial power. Jesus’ speech prepares the reader for the passion narrative. According to John, Jesus’ death and resurrection is a judgment against the imperial powers and ultimately — and paradoxically — a victory over them: **Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.** Indeed, this entire discourse about Jesus’ death, “his lifting up”, might be seen as an ironic reference to an enthronement; by his death on the cross Rome’s authority is challenged.

The gospel of John persists in ascribing imperial titles to Jesus, “king” in particular. Pilate intends to mock “the Jews” by calling Jesus their King (19:14). The soldiers ridicule him by dressing him in royal garb and hailing him “King. Pilate orders the inscription on the cross to read “King of the Jews. Ironically Pilate and his soldiers speak the truth. For those who can see, what appears to be the devastating power of Roman authority is actually its defeat.

Jesus’ discourse on the meaning of his death and implications for discipleship echo Mark in that followers must lose their life in order to save it. We explored this theme before in a Lent sermon. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus challenged his followers to a life of discipleship. He repeats this in John: **Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.**

We said during our February 28th sermon that this has a particular meaning for us today. I said that: *To deny themselves and take up their cross meant for them a much more radical step. It meant a denial of their kinship group.* For me personally this meant denying my family's acceptance of a secular life without God as normal. I had to step out of my family's non-religious culture in which I had been raised. It is a huge step for all of us to leave behind family cultures that shaped us. This is the power of this statement, "deny myself", "take up my cross", and "follow Jesus".

We asked earlier how Jeremiah's new covenant relates to John. This covenant that Jesus's life, death and resurrection ushers is radically new. It is a covenant whereby the laws and regulations of the old covenant is now internalized. It is now exclusively a heart religion. As Jesus told Nicodemus one had to be converted by the Spirit-it was a heart transformation. One in which, as Jeremiah promises: **for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.** At the last supper Jesus said this as he passed out the cup: **This is my blood of the new covenant.** Jesus tells the assembled folks on their way to Passover that they ought to live in the light he offers: **the light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you.**

The seeking Greeks wish to see Jesus. The ability to see what is not accessible to ordinary sight is a theme in John. This gospel concludes with Jesus' words to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). That would be us! Perhaps the seeking Greeks represent those of us for whom this gospel is written. They do not receive a personal audience with Jesus, but the truth is revealed to them, along with us, in Jesus' speech foretelling the meaning of his death. "Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus," is what we sing now.

Amen

