

3.21.2021  
Lent 5 B  
AJH+

*“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”*

Some people of Greek origin came to Philip the Apostle with a request, John’s Gospel tells. They want to see Jesus.

They are Gentiles, outsiders, attending the festival of the Passover, not fully welcome yet able to blend in among the crowds. In that, they share something in common with Jesus, he is not fully welcome. Our Lord’s reputation, as miraculous healer and inspiring teacher, has preceded him and his arrival in the holy city for the festival.

We are, in fact, a bit out of order in the text we read. While we will remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with waving branches and shouts of ‘Hosanna,’ next Sunday, our Gospel lesson for today firmly situates us within Holy Week, those final, fateful days before the crucifixion.

Perhaps this company of friends who approach Philip were a part of the Palm Sunday crowds. Perhaps they heard from others about the masses who joined in the shouts of welcome. Perhaps they were among those swept up in the adrenaline of the moment, and now they want to understand what they have experienced.

Their question to the apostle is a petition and a prayer – We wish to see Jesus.

I wonder if they were disappointed by what they saw and heard next?

First, a game of apostolic telephone – Philip goes to Andrew, then Andrew and he goes to Jesus. The reply, it seems John would have us believe, was not immediate.

Then, enter Jesus. Our Lord offers not so much a warm greeting or an exchange of pleasantries; instead, what follows is a theological lecture.

While not the longer farewell discourse that we will read from on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus gives his disciples the new commandment of radical, self-offering love, this teaching points toward the truth that is now in focus for Jesus, but not yet clear to his disciples – that the hour, his hour, has arrived.

We who read John’s Gospel now, in a post-crucifixion, post-resurrection world, have the privilege of perspective; those who heard Jesus speaking had no such vision. They were still awaiting his arrival as a force of political power, with a show of strength that will rattle the foundations of the status quo.

Jesus offers a different vision of his hour – glorification, through servant-giving, and resurrected life, through death. These are puzzling notions, and purposefully so, I believe. It seems that Jesus, predicting his future, means to offer a confounding image so as to garner the full attention of his hearer.

Those who serve are the ones who will be honored in the coming kingdom of God. You can't be serious, Jesus.

Those who cling to their life will lose it, but those who let it go will discover true life throughout eternity. Really, Jesus?

The image of the grain, then, becomes all the more powerful. Jesus says that unless that grain of wheat falls back into the earth and dies, it remains a simple, single grain, but the one that returns to the earth and dies grows into new life and bears fruit.

St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, uses this image as well, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies...What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable."

It's important to note here that we are now departing the realm of theology and are entering the realm of agriculture – dangerous territory for me. Even a quick search of this topic online reveals more than a few experts, in both realms, arguing over the veracity of these sayings from sacred scripture.

But, while they haggle over the nuances, they all argue the same thing – the grain, the seed, dropped into the soil of the earth is changed, transformed, before it emerges a plant bearing fruit. Something happens in the tomb of the earth that receives the seed.

It is only by giving the seed away, by allowing it to be buried in the cold dirt of early spring, that new life of late summer's harvest can emerge.

The Kentucky agrarian poet, Wendell Berry, says it this way,

Where the imperfect has departed, the perfect  
begins its struggle to return. The good gift  
begins again its descent. The maker moves  
in the unmade, stirring the water until  
it clouds, dark beneath the surface,  
stirring and darkening the soul until pain  
perceives new possibility. There is nothing  
to do but learn and wait, return to work  
on what remains. Seed will sprout in the scar.  
Though death is in the healing, it will heal.

To a group of inquiring foreigners, outsiders, Jesus proclaims himself to be that grain, the seed that will die, be placed in the stony tomb of the earth, and emerge to bear the fruits of resurrection. He is the one who will be lifted up.

Broken, he opens the way to healing. Dying, he opens the way to life.

Together, dear friends, we are turning a corner in our Lenten pilgrimage. Older prayer books called this Sunday, Passion Sunday, and these final two weeks of Lent, Passiontide. The scriptures passages we read have now brought us to Jerusalem for the final time. The moment has arrived, once again, for us to journey with Jesus into those pivotal days of our story.

The narrative is a familiar one – the words, the scenes, the people and places, known – but, let us endeavor to listen and see with open ears and fresh eyes. These are the days we recall our salvation, through suffering and sorrow, our life, through death and resurrection.

All along the path of these days we've traveled, perhaps many, many times before, let our prayer be joined with those who approached the apostle, Philip – We wish to see Jesus.

We wish to see Jesus.

Amen.