

North Kildonan United Church

21st March 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“We Wish to see Jesus”

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Psalm 119: 9-16

John 12: 20-33

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus". It was a simple enough request, but the times were hardly simple, or easy. In John's gospel we are told that it was some Greeks who wished to see Jesus, Greeks who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of the Passover. Perhaps they were curious Gentiles, who had heard about the Passover, or perhaps they were Greek Jews, not Gentiles, Jews who were members of the Diaspora, that great dispersal of Jews from their homeland to Babylon and other parts of the world. If so, then these Jews, who made their home in Greece and probably understood themselves as Greeks, had come to their spiritual home, to Jerusalem, for Passover.

And what a Passover festival they encountered. By this point, word about Jesus was spreading widely about the land, word that frightened the religious leaders but energized the people. Amongst the deeds attributed to Jesus was the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This ran so counter to the teachings of the chief priests that they planned to put both Jesus and Lazarus to death. You see, in the numbers game which religion often turns into, the story of Lazarus coming back to life was causing Jews to desert Judaism and believe in Jesus. Kill them both and put an end to this heresy they thought.

So Jerusalem was a happening place that Passover. Word that this Jesus would be in Jerusalem brought larger than usual crowds to the Festival and these crowds were excited to catch a glimpse of this wonderworker. To welcome Jesus, the people cut branches off of palm trees and as he entered Jerusalem on a young donkey the people waved their branches and cried out: *"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-the King of Israel!"* Next Sunday we will mark this same event as Palm Sunday, though we will hear Mark's account of the entry into Jerusalem.

Some of the crowd there that day had also been present when Lazarus walked out of his tomb, and they freely shared with others what they had seen. The joy and excitement amongst that crowd would have been truly astounding. Not all were astounded, however. As John writes: *"The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'"*

And Jesus, what was he thinking as the palm branches waved around him and the children ran around his donkey and the people proclaimed him King of Israel. Was Jesus waving back, smiling like a politician on Election Day, drinking in the adulation of the crowds? Or was the expression on his face troubled and concerned? He knew what the crowds did not know, he knew what the religious leaders had in mind for him, and he

knew the cruel fate that was awaiting him at the hands of the Romans. The joyous theme of this festival would be short-lived, for this King of Israel riding in solemn pomp was to be the sacrificial lamb, the ultimate sign and symbol of God's love for the world. The people didn't know that, but the Pharisees and priests, perhaps with some sadness within them, were convinced that this Jesus movement needed to be dealt with now, must end before, as they said, the world had gone after him.

Our gospel begins at this point. Some Greeks, we don't know how many and we don't need to know that, approach Philip with their simple request. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Perhaps they thought they might have a social visit with Jesus, and in doing so they might discover some interesting tidbits to take back to their family and friends in Greece. Stories about this miracle worker, this healer, this charming prophet who so gently disarmed the powers around him, these stories would be great to share with the folks back home. It would make the challenging trip to Jerusalem and back worth everything it cost.

Or, since they were Greeks, and Greeks of that era tended to be confident of their philosophical training, perhaps they wanted a stirring debate of the merits of Hellenism versus Judaism.

Yes, you can almost hear them say to one another: *"We certainly picked the right year to come to the festival! Wait till we tell the folks back home about this. But we must talk to this Jesus, we must find out what he's all about and what all this fuss is about, so we'll have more to tell when we head home. Look, there's one of his disciples, I think his name is Philip, let's ask him to arrange an interview."*

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The gospel suggests that their request was not granted—or at least not granted in the way they hoped. If they stayed around Jerusalem long enough, and it wouldn't be that long now, they would see Jesus, not a Jesus to chat with, but Jesus, lifted high on the cross, dying for them and for all.

This Jesus was no curiosity to interview then tell stories about. This Jesus was to suffer and die, and on the third day rise again. Later on in this gospel, another person will ask to see Jesus, but that person will be Thomas and his request will be based on fear and love, not curiosity and storytelling.

Jesus responds to the request to visually see him by predicting what the immediate future holds for him and by emphasizing the vital importance of his death.

To see Jesus, to truly see Jesus, is to hold together the triumphant tone of Palm Sunday with the reality of his death on the cross on Good Friday and his rising from the dead on Easter Sunday. That event, that dying and rising from the dead, is what makes Jesus more than a prophet who was misunderstood, more than a teacher who died too soon, more than a revolutionary whose politics didn't quite catch on.

Only Jesus knows for sure that he is moving into the final stages of his life on earth. The political and religious powers are seeking ways to silence his message and dismiss his following and that work might involve death, as it usually did under Roman tyranny. But his followers hoped for better days.

Jesus knows that the days of healing the sick and teaching the multitudes are behind him, no more sermons on the mount or picnic lunches of fish and bread for the masses. What lies ahead is the fulfillment of his mission and ministry. As Jesus says: *"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"*. Just before this he had spoken of his own immanent death: *"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."*

Did those Greeks hear any of this? We don't know, but if they did, they would have received a clear proclamation by Jesus, declaring that the way of the cross is the way of eternal life, and that in his being lifted up on the cross, all people will be drawn to him. And, **and**, that the ruler of this world, the ultimate ruler of this world, is death itself and by Christ rising from the dead, the power of death is defeated.

In a YouTube video, and also in his sermon for Easter 2010, Bishop Tom Wright tells this story, which sums up what I'm trying to say.

"The taxi driver looked back at me in his mirror. His face was a mixture of amusement and sympathy. We were stuck in traffic and he'd asked me, as they do, what I did for a living.

'Ah,' he said, 'you Church of England people' (having told me he was a Roman Catholic himself). 'You're still having all that trouble about women bishops, aren't you?'

I had to admit that that was indeed the case.

'The way I look at it,' he said, 'is this: if God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, all the rest is basically rock'n'roll.'"

"If God raised Jesus Christ from the dead all the rest is basically rock'n'roll." Wow, the whole gospel summed up by the wisdom of the taxi driver!

One final story. In the days of the Soviet Union, when Christianity was a nuisance to be eradicated, there was a priest at a particular church. In the district there was a government official whose job it was to preach atheism, and to promote the closing down of the churches. This official would visit the priest, trying to demoralize him and urging him to do something productive with his life.

One day he visited and said: *"Your church is hardly attended by anyone."*

"Yes I know." replied the priest.

"The people who go there are all old women."

"Yes I know."

"They are all going to die", said the official.

"Yes I know."

"What are you going to do then?" asked the official.

The priest thought for a moment and then said: *"God will send us more old women."*

Amen.