

“We Wish to See Jesus”

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (John 12:20-21).

It was Passover, and the streets of Jerusalem were packed. Pilgrims from all over the world had come to observe the feast, and it was in this tense and energized atmosphere that Jesus made His way into the Holy City. John tells us that when, “the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem...they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (John 12:12-13). The words that rang out from the crowd as Jesus made His way into Jerusalem that day were no ordinary words of greeting. These words were taken straight from Psalm 118. They referred the promised Messiah of God, and the presence of these ancient words on the lips of the crowd underscored their expectation that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to save them. But in reality, they had no idea what that would mean.

As the parade of palms came to its conclusion, John introduces us to some Greeks who had come into Jerusalem to worship during the Passover. While they were gentiles, these God-fearing men, were well-informed about what was going on in the Jewish culture of the day and, as this impromptu procession unfolded before them, they approached Phillip with a request, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” And they weren’t alone! On this day of triumphal entry, many people wanted to see Jesus, but their expectations were all over the map. For some people, including the curious Greeks, Jesus was a gifted teacher, and someone they hoped would provide them with intellectual insights about God. To them, Jesus came as a Rabbi who could take them to a new level of knowledge and understanding.

For others, Jesus was a revolutionary. He was the answer to all of the political frustrations Israel had endured from Rome. To them, Jesus represented a nationalistic hope for a new and glorified Jewish state. The cheers and chants that came from their mouths were for the restoration of an earthly kingdom and a new age of Jewish rule. They cried, “Blessed is the King of Israel!” and they meant exactly what they said.

For yet others, Jesus was a miracle worker who could heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and feed the hungry. For them, Jesus was the one who could take care of all their physical needs. This group of hosanna-shouting subjects had watched for three years as Jesus performed amazing acts of power and compassion, culminating with the miracle of miracles as, just weeks before, He had called Lazarus out of the grave. This act had been done quite publicly and, in fact, John writes, “The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign” (John 12:17-18).

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus meant something different to everyone in the crowd, yet no one truly saw Jesus for who He was. They all looked at Jesus through the lens of their own self-interest, they all wanted Jesus to bring them their own personal version of salvation, and if we are honest, that is exactly the way we want to see Jesus.

Like the Greeks who spoke to Phillip, we often see Jesus as a way for us to gain the moral high ground over others in our lives. Like the zealots, sometimes we see Jesus as way to control our

world and protect our interests. And, like those who had come from Lazarus' tomb, we see Jesus as an escape from the troubles of this life, and an antidote to the poisonous world in which we live.

This reading from John is all about seeing Jesus, and yet the truth about our Savior is not revealed to us on our terms, but on God's. One of the interesting elements in this text is that Jesus doesn't give the Greeks a direct answer. Their request is a straightforward, "We wish to see Jesus." But instead of a simple answer, Jesus responds with a powerful and puzzling proclamation that goes way beyond anything the Palm Sunday crowd could have imagined. Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). For three years, and no fewer than four times in John's Gospel, Jesus had resisted requests to display His power with these words: "My time has not yet come" (John 2:4; 7:6; 7:30; 8:30). But now Jesus answers their question by essentially saying, "This is it! I am here to do what I came to do! My time has come." And, even though He doesn't answer the question of the Greeks in a short and simple way, His answer couldn't be more important.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Here, for the first time, Jesus begins to publicly describe what is going to happen in the days to come and, as He paints the picture of where He is going, He lets them know that the fulfillment of His saving purpose will come at a great cost. Jesus said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.'" (John 12:27-28).

As He stands at the edge of the week in which He will give His life, He is in anguish. And He is tormented. And yet He knows that this is the only way. This is the way sin must be addressed. This is the way God will punish the rebellion of His creation. This is the way that justice will be carried out, and through the punishment that will be laid on Him, mankind will be healed, and God will be glorified!

The answer to the Greeks, and to the Palm Sunday crowd – and to you and to me – is that you can't see Jesus without looking at the cross. This is the message of Palm Sunday, that Jesus knowingly, willingly, obediently, and resolutely rode into Jerusalem to the misguided shouts of "Hosanna" to do for us what only He could do by enduring an unthinkable, undeserved, and humiliating death in our place. Paul described this act of love in today's epistle when he wrote that Christ Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). In the last steps of His journey to the cross, Jesus thought of you. In fact, He gave His life to draw you to Himself. And today, you can take heart, because that is exactly where you are. Today, in Christ Jesus, we are kernels of wheat who fall to the ground and die; we die to self-interest, we die to self-reliance, and we die to self-righteousness. And here – at the cross of Jesus – you can lay down your life knowing that today, as you see Jesus on the cross, you have forgiveness and you have life. Go with the peace of these promises God has made to you today. "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" Amen.

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