

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus”

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 10.00am on Sunday 25th March 2012, Passion Sunday.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus”. That is the request of the unnamed Greek visitors at the beginning of today's Gospel. How, I wonder, in this modern ‘Greek age’ do we help others to see Jesus? Ancient Greece was renowned for its rationalism and scepticism, and it produced philosophies in that mould. Our post Enlightenment age is not dissimilar. We want proof, preferably scientific; we want things to make sense. Mystery is rationalized away. God is boxed up. And few people from these sceptical roots now even say “we want to see Jesus”. The very request seems nonsensical. So how in this rational modern Greek age can we help others to see Jesus?

The incident John describes in this passage is a turning point in his Gospel. On four previous occasions he tells us that Jesus' hour had not yet come, first of all at the wedding in Cana. But now it has, and perhaps the request of the Greeks was a catalyst for that. Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Now is the hour for Jesus to be seen. The Greeks' request has a deeper level of meaning: it is a request not just to meet Jesus, but to see him as he is: the real Jesus, the glorified Jesus.

So that is what Jesus must do; and what the rest of the gospel is about. Yet the means of glorification, the means of making himself known is at odds with what might be expected. There is no revelation in clouds of glory, no epiphany, no unveiling of divine status, no bringing in of the Kingdom, no act to right wrongs and establish justice; nothing that in human terms could be called a triumph or victory or divine manifestation.

Instead the means of making himself known is the path summed up in the words: “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit”. In other words, the way of glorification for Jesus, the way he is to be known is by treading the path of self-sacrifice and suffering. It is the path of choosing to die to self, to ambition, to pride, to success, to status, to self-preservation, all in total trust in his Father. The way of the cross. And Jesus takes that path believing that that sacrifice will somehow reveal who he is.

There is no logic to that, no rhyme or reason. It is folly to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews. To a rational age, it is a senseless act. How can sacrifice, death, defeat be a glorification and a revelation? It makes no sense. But then Jesus had a belief and a trust which those imbued with the *Zeitgeist* of a rational age find difficult to have - a complete trust in God who can do what for human beings is impossible; who brings creation into being from nothing; who gives life to the dead (Lazarus) hope to the hopeless (Zacchaeus), sight to the blind (Bartimaeus); a God who transforms the dead, hopeless and barren into new centres of life and creativity. Jesus' first steps on the way of the cross were taken in the context of trust and belief in this God. Through *this* path, *this* God would bring fruit 40fold, 60fold, 100fold. Jesus probably couldn't see how, but he trusted that God would. And so he embraces this path to be seen, known and glorified.

His decision to walk that path was not an easy one. He says “now my soul is troubled”. There is a cost. John's Gospel has no record of the trial Jesus underwent in Gethsemane, no anguished prayer. But we get a hint of it in this morning's passage: “And what should I say? Father save me from this hour?” But the answer comes immediately. “No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour”. And with that he rejects the gathering to himself of everything that is usually perceived as glorifying human beings: power, status, success, life. Instead he places himself in God's hands, trusting, believing. And God did not let him down. He was glorified and he was seen.

So I return to my original question. How in this modern Greek age, this age of reason, do we help others to see Jesus? Think for a moment about how others have helped you to see Jesus. For me

there are two sets of people. First and most immediate: the people who ran a Christian group at my school. In particular four men, all old boys of the school who devoted their lives to nurturing this group, at considerable self-sacrifice. They were an inspiration of Christian care, love and faith; and their example and the atmosphere they built up in that group was what brought me to Christ. Who, I wonder, did that for you?

The second set of people is more distant, but no less important. The saints and heroes of the faith, many for me modern examples: Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero – all of whom devoted their lives and often sacrificed their lives in the service of Christ and others. Who, I wonder, would you name?

Together, these people, near and distant, helped me to see Jesus. What they have in common, I think, is that they joined their lives to Jesus' walk to the cross. They did not put a high priority on their own status, or look to personal ambition or seek personal gain. They didn't focus narrowly on preserving their lives. They sacrificed themselves, often in ways which seemed foolish to the world around; they said and did things against the prevailing spirit of the age, even though often it must have seemed like a drop in the ocean or spitting into the wind. And the reason they did so, their context, was a belief like Christ's that God would not let them down; that he would bring things they could not foresee out of their obedient following of Christ to the cross. 40fold, 60fold, 100fold.

You may have heard of Maximilian Kolbe. What he did illustrates what I mean, and on this Passion Sunday, it is worth remembering his story. Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish priest and a Franciscan Friar. In the early years of the war he sheltered many Jewish refugees in his community, and he spoke out against Nazi ideas. For this he was arrested and sent to Auschwitz. In July 1941 a prisoner escaped. As a punishment the commandant started choosing 10 people to be put into a starvation cell. One of those chosen, a Polish army sergeant called Francisek Gajowinczek, broke down in tears and begged for mercy. At this, Maximilian Kolbe asked and was allowed to take the sergeant's place. He entered the starvation cell with the nine others and eventually they all perished.

In that kind of situation, which is beyond our imagining, what possible good *rationally* could Maximilian Kolbe's action have had? It was a senseless act, which may not have preserved the sergeant's life nor done anything to change the horror. Yet he still did it. He joined himself to Jesus' chosen path in faith and trust. And out of what he did has come inspiration for millions. His self-sacrifice has helped others to see Jesus.

So how do we help others to see Jesus? By joining ourselves to the path he trod to make himself known. By joining ourselves to that same path which countless Christians have trodden before us. Only you can know what that means in practice for you, what God has called and is calling you to. But it is likely to look far from sensible or rational; it is likely to feel a drop in the ocean or an impossible task to undertake; it is likely to involve self-denial, self-limitation, even suffering. But I believe that it is when we as individuals or as a Church truly follow Jesus on the way of the cross, that our rational age will take note, and that Jesus will be seen, known and glorified. All of which is expressed far more eloquently in that prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola which spoke to me first in assemblies at school:

Dear Lord, teach me to be generous; teach me to serve thee as thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to seek for any reward, save that of knowing that I do thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.