

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Gospel: John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"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. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

REFLECTION 1: 'SEEING' JESUS

Today's Gospel selection (John 12:20-33) seems at first glance to be a number of golden sayings of Jesus that appear without a common theme. My initial impression was that Jesus, aware of his impending passion and death was speaking randomly and it was the memory of this agony that is evoked here. At a deeper level however there appears a thread of unity binding these utterances. It focuses on that grain of wheat that he weaves into a brief parable that knits his thoughts together. What happens within that grain symbol, he shares with us.

John the Evangelist presents the end of Jesus' ministry within the framework of a week that begins 'six days before Passover'. There were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast. They came to Philip who spoke Greek and asked him, 'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'. These Greeks were sympathetic to Judaism, but fell short of integration. They want to 'see' Jesus. The perfect model of the believer is the disciple who having entered the empty tomb on Easter Day, 'saw and believed' (John 20:8) – the request of these God-fearing Greeks is one of faith. Asking Philip to see Jesus suggests that access to faith is gradual – to see Jesus one must be led to him by an apostle. Nothing is said about how Jesus received their request and what became of them. The narrative comes to an abrupt end.

The Greek's access to Jesus is connected to the 'hour' of Jesus and reveals that that hour has now come. The hour that Jesus recalls so often in the Gospel of John is that of the glorification of the 'Son of Man'. It is the hour of his Passover – passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, for which Jesus had come, for which he longs, though fearing it – it's the hour when Jesus will draw all human beings to himself. Then at that hour, everyone will see Jesus lifted up on the cross and looking upon him, obtain eternal salvation.

Then comes a little parable. The grain of wheat fallen to earth designates Jesus, who by his death becomes the standing tree from which everyone can receive the fruit of life. From the death of one is gained the salvation of a multitude. This same image can be taken to mean the tree of the cross on which the Lord was lifted up and which gives fruit in abundance to feed all people. It is from the light of the cross, planted at the centre of the earth that Jesus draws all people to himself. It is at this hour that Jesus becomes king of the universe. In order to share in the glorification of Christ, disciples must follow

Jesus by showing a determination similar to his – must go to the point of losing their lives ‘in this world’, to ‘preserve it for eternal life’.

Jesus does not hesitate. He does not want his Father to deliver him from this hour, since it is for this hour that he has come. He simply says, ‘Father, glorify your name’. His passion glorifies the Father because it forcefully reveals the power of his love that saves the whole of humankind. Grain of wheat fallen into the earth, he has risen, tree of life laden with fruit. Lifted up on the cross, he is forever the sign and source of salvation for all those who look to him with faith and follow him into the glory God reserves for them. He is the head of the people of the new and eternal covenant in his blood poured out for all as atonement for the sins of all.

REFLECTION 2:

DEAD MAN WALKING

‘Dead Man Walking’, the 1995 film, brought to life Sr. Helen Prejean’s book of the same name, which launched her worldwide crusade to abolish the death penalty. When the condemned prisoner begins that sombre procession towards the execution chamber, the prison guard announces these words: ‘Dead Man Walking’. Jesus himself was a dead man walking in those final days in Jerusalem. He knew that death awaited him. There was no turning back – no way out of walking towards his execution. His death would not be the end. In today’s Gospel Jesus announces his death and resurrection. ‘the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’.

As we near the end of our Lenten journey we accompany Jesus on his final journey in this world. Our Gospel (Jn. 12:20-33) opens with the request of some Greeks who want to see Jesus. They appear and almost immediately disappear from the scene, but John mentions them for a reason. These foreigners represent ‘the whole world going after him’. Their desire to see Jesus underlines the fact that the revelation of Jesus’ glory will not be limited to Israel. The Gospel focuses on Jesus’ understanding of his hour of glory, the time of judgment of the world and his prayerful relationship with the Father.

Jesus’ response to hearing about the Greeks is to say that his hour has come. Reflecting on his hour of glory, he speaks of the grain of wheat that must die to bear fruit. According to Jesus the life of this world is defined by death. Death calls into question everything we try to achieve and seems to be the inevitable horizon of human life. We can love our life but in the end we must lose it. Jesus makes no pretence that this is easy and he now admits his own anguish. His grief like everything else in his life stems from love. It springs from his love of humanity and he mourns the plight of those who have committed themselves to the love of this world.

It reminds us of the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. During his agony there Jesus cried out to God, ‘Father not my will, but your will be done’. Had Jesus not died to his will in the garden, you and I would not be saved from our sins. They teach us that we must be willing to die to our own will if we wish to bear fruit for God. This is not easy and no one said it was. As one child put it, ‘I guess following Jesus sure ain’t for sissies!’ The Good News is that if we imitate the grain of wheat and die to ourselves we too will bear much fruit.