

John 12: 20-33      **Jesus predicts his death**

March 17th, 2024, Grenoble, 5th in Lent

**readings:**      Jeremiah 31: 31-34      A new covenant  
                         John 12: 20-33              Jesus predicts his death

**Introduction**

It is good to be back at St Marc's, Grenoble. For those who don't know, I am a retired vicar from Edinburgh. From 2000 to 2013 Chaplain along the road in Lyon. Susie and I were here in 2019 and 2020. And Joanna was part of this congregation in 1997-98 or thereabouts.

**Preamble**

We continue to move through Lent; period of penitence and prayer in church life. We accompany Jesus and his disciples on their journey towards Jerusalem; to the awfulness of Good Friday and the ultimate triumph of Easter. Today's gospel reading follows the anointing of Jesus at Bethany [12: 1-11] and the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem [12: 12-19]. Which, somewhat perversely, following the pattern of the Common Lectionary, is the focus of our gospel reading next week, when we arrive at Palm Sunday.

In what we sometimes call the 'real world', awful things are happening. Tens of thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are now homeless, bereaved, suffering from constant bombardment by Israeli military; and now facing the real threat of famine. In eastern Ukraine a senseless stalemate continues. In Russia the [re]election of Putin is a cynical sham.

**On the way to what ?**

It is easy for us; we know that Lent leads inexorably towards Passion Week and Easter. But what about the disciples ? What did they imagine was waiting for them in Jerusalem ? I think some of them must have imagined that they were on the brink of great things. That Jesus was going in some super-dramatic way to inaugurate the Kingdom; the rule of God on earth. And that they would share in his worldly success. And maybe become his lieutenants; bishops and archdeacons ? But, as we know and they will learn, it doesn't play out like that.

**John 12: 20-33**

*'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'.*

These are words that were once carved on the side of pulpits in English country churches. A desire that the preaching of the Word would enable those listening to encounter the Word made Flesh. Who were these Greeks ? The kingdom of Greece did not exist. They may have been proselyte Jews; those who had converted to the Jewish faith but were not of the Jewish race. They were essentially *Greek speakers* and Gentiles. Who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover.

v.23      Jesus says: *'Now is the time for the Son of Man to be glorified'.*

v.24      The grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and die in order for it to produce a crop.

v.26      *'Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant will be also.  
                 My father will honour the one who serves me.'*

vv.27-8      Jesus's heart is troubled. *'Father, save me from this hour'.* Is there no alternative ?  
                 And gives the answer: *'No , it was for this very hour that I have come',*

### **What is this passage about ?**

Eugene Peterson thinks it is essentially about *prayer*.

We know that Jesus prayed; there are 17 references in the gospels.

But we are only told what Jesus prayed on 3 occasions. As here:

***“Father glorify your name.”***

As we move through John’s Gospel the emphasis shifts from Jesus’s life to Jesus’s death. And this verse, John 12:28, is arguably the pivot.

Much of the Gospel[s] is concerned with the last week of Jesus’ life.

The week starts with the anointing of Jesus’s feet at Bethany, in the house of Lazarus and Mary and Martha [John 12: 1-10]. Jesus takes the opportunity to link the event to his coming death and burial [vv.7-8]. The next day we have the triumphal entry into Jerusalem [12: 12-19]. There are great crowds waving palm branches. Jesus rides on a donkey, apparently in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah. Here the disciples must surely have imagined that the kingdom is at hand.

Because they haven’t yet understood *what kind of Messiah ...*

Jesus’s response is elusive; the seed that falls to the ground has to die before it can produce new life. [And we know that the seed that falls on good soil produces fruit in abundance.] We believe he is talking of his own death. But the death too of his followers. The man who clings on to life will lose everything. But the man [and the woman] who surrenders his life to Jesus will live for ever.

In v.26 Jesus declines the temptation to pray for a release from his troubles. He seems to send away the Greek tourists with their cameras. *“You can’t take photos of glory !”*. Rather he prays ‘***Father, glorify your name***’. And God’s answer is immediate ” *I have ... and I will again* ”. Jesus tells his followers that he will be *lifted up* [we understand *crucified*]. And that by his crucifixion he will draw all men to himself.

### **Seeing Jesus**

*“Sir, we would see Jesus.”* It was these Greeks who first said this line. They would have said it in Greek, too, which is why they approached a disciple who had a Greek name and who had grown up in a town, Bethsaida, that had a mixed population of Jews and Greeks. Maybe these seekers didn’t speak Aramaic and so needed to find the one disciple they knew could interpret for them. Whoever they were, they had heard of Jesus and wanted an introduction.

But the story makes an odd turn. There is no indication that Jesus paid much attention to Philip or Andrew; no indication he ever meets the very people who first said, *“Sir, we would see Jesus.”* In verse 36, we are told that Jesus hid himself from those Greeks and everyone else—indeed.

Jesus would draw all people to himself on that cross, but would anyone come? Would anyone let themselves be drawn, or would they hide their faces, turn aside, run away, look for someone else, somewhere worth following? *“Sir, we would see Jesus”* the Greeks said to Philip. In a way, everything Jesus said in verses 23-36 was an extended answer to that request, as though Jesus were saying to these Greeks, *“It’s OK that you want to see me, but wait a few days. I invite you to come and see me Friday afternoon. You won’t be able to miss me. You’ll know me when you see me. I’ll be the suffering and dying one. But I hope you’ll come by to see me anyway.”*

## **Envoi**

We are aware of the many blessings of being a Christian. But there is also a cost. There are people in this congregation for whom being a Christian has been a costly journey. We can give thanks that few in our time are called to martyrdom. But this passage is a reminder that for Jesus this journey towards Jerusalem is the Way of the Cross. And today, on Passion Sunday, we are called to walk with him.

The episode emphasises, as did last week's passage on the cleansing of the Temple, the *universality* of the gospel; good news for Jews and Gentiles alike. But the full import of the gospel must wait upon Jesus's death and resurrection.

v.32 *'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself'.*  
This is the lifting up that we talked about last week. Not a snake on a pole.  
But Jesus on the Cross. To draw all men to himself; Jews, Greek-speakers,  
Gentiles, Nigerians, French, and English.

If we, like the Greeks, would see Jesus, we need to be at the foot of the Cross on Good Friday. And then, in time, to rejoice with the disciples at the empty tomb and the appearances that follow of the risen Lord.

*'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'.*

**Amen.**