

## “Seeing Jesus”

*Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.”*

Our world is infatuated with celebrities. We see it in the royal treatment afforded to professional athletes. We witness it as crowds fanatically flock to catch a glimpse of a famous actor or rock star. Whether through fame or infamy, true heroism or pure spin, celebrities draw our attention and capture our interest, and yet if we're honest, the desire to see a celebrity is usually centered much more in what we think they are, than in the truth of who that person really is.

Today's Gospel reading from John 12 takes place on the first Palm Sunday, and as Jesus made His way into Jerusalem, the crowds gathered around Him in much the same we might react if a celebrity made his way into town today. During the Passover Feast, the streets of Jerusalem swelled. Some have estimated that during this Jewish feast, the population of the city tripled in size as Jews from all over the civilized world came to the holy city to observe the Passover. It was in this tense and energized atmosphere that Jesus made His way into the city. John describes the scene for us writing that, “As the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, they took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!’” (John 12:12-13).

The words that rang out from the crowd as Jesus made His way into Jerusalem were no ordinary words of greeting. These words, taken from Psalm 118, referred to Jesus as one sent from God, and the presence of these ancient words on the lips of the crowd underscored their conviction that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to save them! This was an amazing event and, as the parade came to its conclusion, John tells us about some Greeks who had come into Jerusalem to worship during the Passover. We learn from the text that these Greeks were God-fearing men, and by this John meant that these were people who were drawn to the morality of Judaism, but yet had not converted to the Jewish faith. They were probably well-informed about what was going on in the Jewish culture of the day and as this impromptu procession unfolded before them - and they found out who was at center of all the excitement - they approached Phillip, with a request, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” And they weren't alone!

On this day of triumphal entry, many people wanted to see Jesus. For some, including these moralistic Greeks, Jesus was a gifted teacher; someone they hoped would provide them with some profound intellectual insight. Perhaps they had heard Him teach before and they craved more of the wisdom that He had spoken in the past. To them, Jesus came as a proven Rabbi who would take them to a new level of knowledge and understanding.

For some, Jesus was a revolutionary; the answer to all of the political problems and frustrations Israel had endured with Rome. To them Jesus represented rebellion and the nationalistic hope for a new and glorified Jewish state. The cheers and chants that came from their mouths, as they walked beside the donkey on which Jesus rode, were for the restoration of an earthly kingdom and a new age of Jewish rule that they wanted Jesus to spark. “Blessed is the King of Israel!” they cried, and they meant exactly what they said.

For others, Jesus was a miracle worker or a prophet or maybe even the true Messiah; the one sent by God to heal the sick, to give sight to the blind, and to feed the hungry. For them, Jesus was the one who could take care of all their 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 raised Lazarus from the dead. This act had been done quite publicly and, in fact, in 12:17-19, John writes, “Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him.”

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus meant something different to everyone in the crowd, and today as we gather, the question I challenge you to consider is, “Which Jesus did you come to see?” On that first Palm Sunday, no one saw Jesus for Who He truly was. They looked at Jesus through the lens of their own self-interest, and if we are honest, that is exactly how we see Jesus today. Like the Greeks who spoke to Phillip, we often see Jesus as a way for us to gain intellectual or 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, in Jesus, we see an escape from the difficulties and troubles of this life – an antidote to the poison world in which we live.

This reading from John is all about seeing Jesus, and yet what we find in our suffering 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 would like 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). And now, in the light of His entry into Jerusalem, Jesus answers their question saying, "My time has come! This is it! I am here to do what I came to do! I am here to be glorified!" 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. "Watch and you will see what I am all about."

"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (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 this destination comes at a great price. "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came 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 troubled. He is anguished. He is in torment. And yet He knows that this is the only way. This is the way in which sin will be dealt with. This is the way in which God will punish the rebellion of His creation. This is the way that justice will be carried out. And through the punishment that is laid on Him, mankind will be healed and God will be glorified!

We say that we want to see Jesus, but Scripture says, "Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3). We say that we want to see Jesus, and Scripture says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). We say that we want to see Jesus, and Jesus says, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).

The answer to the Greeks, and to the Palm Sunday crowd, and to you and to me is that to see Jesus, is to see 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 had to be done and what only He could do by enduring an unthinkable, undeserved and horrifying death in our place. Paul described this act of love in today's epistle when he wrote that Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:6-11).

On the cross, and only on the cross, do we see Jesus for who He truly is; do we see Jesus for why He came; and in the cross of Jesus Christ we are given the knowledge of who we are in Him. In seeing Jesus there on the cross for us, we are given the power to live as ones whose sins have been forgiven, who can "hate our lives in this world," who can follow Christ, and who can serve Him and glorify the Father.

Jesus spoke these words in the last steps of His journey to the cross. And that is where we are as well. Like Jesus we are kernels of wheat who fall to the ground and die; we die to self...to self-reliance, to self-service, to self-centeredness, and this death to sin is only made possible through the cross. Here we are made right with God, here we are given a new birth into a hope that cannot perish, spoil or fade, and here we can give up our lives, knowing that as we follow Jesus to Calvary, we have the promise that we too will share in His glory. Fix your eyes on the cross and you will see Jesus. Amen.

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