

“Would You Like to See Jesus?”

Introduction: The parents of a ten-year old boy who was failing fifth grade decided to enroll him in a private, Catholic school after exhausting all other options. After the first day, the boy stormed into his house, walked right past his parents, and headed to his room, locking the door behind him. Two hours later he emerged for a quick meal and then went straight back to his room until bedtime. This pattern continued until the end of the first quarter. After school on that day, the boy walked brought his report card home, dropped the envelope on the kitchen table without saying a word, and went straight to his room. Upon opening the envelope, his parents were thrilled to see an “A” under the boy’s worst subject – math. They rushed excitedly to his room and wondered what had happened. “Was it the nuns?” his father asked. The boy shook his head. “Was it the textbook or the curriculum?” his mother asked? Again, the boy shook his head. “Well, they persisted, was it the one-on-one tutoring or the peer-mentoring?” “No, no, no,” the boy finally said. And then he explained. “From the very first day of school, I knew these folks were serious about math, and that I had to buckle down cause when I walked into the school lobby I saw a guy nailed to a plus sign!”

Like this young boy, many have difficulty seeing the cross, or why Jesus hung on it, clearly. Sometime during the last week of his life, John tells us that a group of Greeks came to a disciple named Philip and asked if they could see Jesus. Philip ran their request by another disciple named Andrew and together the two of them decided to let Jesus know. But instead of entering into a Q and A with these Gentile inquirers, Jesus starts talking about his “hour” finally coming and about a seed that needs to die in order to produce much fruit. As it turns out, he’s highlighting the fact that in order to see him clearly, we will need to understand the nature of his death, and the life that emerges from it.

I. The Triumphal Entry

A. Let’s begin with what it sometimes ironically called the triumphal entry, the grand entry of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem, with a great crowd waving palms, on what has come to be known, therefore, as Palm Sunday. The term Triumphal Entry is ironic because by the end of the week, the crowds that had hailed Jesus as the coming king were calling for him to be crucified, instead of a hardened criminal named Barabbas.

B. Let’s think about this crowd for a moment. Why was the crowd there? The crowd had come to Jerusalem because it was the beginning of the feast of Passover, one of the three great pilgrimage festivals that celebrated how God had worked in Israel’s history on her behalf. Passover celebrated the rescue of God’s people from slavery in Egypt. How large was the crowd? Estimates are that the regular population of Jerusalem at the time was around 50,000 and that during Passover that number swelled to more than 100,000.

C. But most importantly, why was the crowd waving palms? Palms had become a symbol of Jewish nationalism. They had first been used a couple of hundred years earlier to celebrate the Jewish victory over foreign invaders who had taken over the Temple. In a parade for a fellow named Simon Maccabeus, who had led the victory, Jews went into the fields and cut palm branches to welcome him. Sadly, a hundred years later, in 63 B.C., Pompey and his Roman army had captured Jerusalem, massacring priests and desecrating the Temple, placing Palestine once again under foreign rule. By the time Jesus came to Jerusalem, this foreign oppressor had been in power for nearly one hundred years and the people wanted to see them crushed and removed.

Having heard so much about Jesus and his many miraculous exploits, including having just raised a man named Lazarus from the dead, the crowd began to spread the word that this fellow Jesus might just be the new liberator they had been looking for.

D. And so the throngs who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover went out, like the Jews of old, to cut palm branches and shout “Hosanna!” which actually means, “God save us.” Such a cry was found in Psalm 118, which was part of a group of psalms sung at festival times. It was a freedom song, a “We Shall Overcome” declaration. They also proclaimed, from that same psalm, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” which declared that a blessing was to be placed on the pilgrims who had arrived in Jerusalem. But then they added, “Blessed is the king of Israel.” This was not directly in the psalm, but it clearly was intended to link Jesus with being a king like David who had come to rescue God’s people. Well, Jesus had come to rescue God’s people, but who were they and how was he going to go about it? As it turns out, the “triumph” in the Triumphal Entry was to happen in a vastly different way than the crowd had expected. Jesus would be turning the palms of Jewish nationalism and liberation into a cross that would lead to kingdom citizenship for people of every race, nation, tribe, and language.

II. The Hour Has Come

A. The first hint that Jesus would be fulfilling the hopes and dreams of the crowd in an entirely different way than expected came through the word picture he presented by choosing a donkey as his mount. There were no cars with loudspeakers on the roof in that day so Jesus communicated with the crowd by choosing an animal that was a beast of burden, and one that symbolized peace. Had Jesus come to meet the Romans with force, he would have ridden on a war horse. But he had something else in mind.

B. The second hint regarding the unexpected nature of his triumph came in his response to the Greeks who had wanted to see him. As the Pharisees had commented, when seeing the adoration of the crowds, “Look how the whole world has gone after him!” (v. 19), the Greeks were from among this “whole world.” They were not of the Jewish nation, but were most likely part of the Gentile crowd that had come to the feast because they had become disillusioned with the whole panoply of their gods who didn’t seem to help them out very much and were attracted in some way to the monotheism of the Jewish faith. “God-fearers” they became known as. They wanted to do more than just see Jesus passing by. “Would like to see” Jesus is really too weak a translation. This word is from the “desire” word group and so “earnestly desired” to see him captures what was going on in their hearts a bit better. They really desired to learn what he was all about and if he had anything to do with satisfying their thirst.

As the men who went on retreat last weekend learned, “desire is the straw that stirs the drink of our spiritual life” (Ron Rolheiser). And as these Greeks reveal, a desire to really see Jesus for who he is and what he has come to do is what begins to stir the “drink” that is Christianity, it’s what brings us in tune with what beginning to follow Jesus is all about. Are you wondering what that is? Are you dissatisfied in some way with whatever spiritual path you have been pursuing, and think that perhaps, Jesus might have something you need and are looking for?

C. Jesus responds to the desire of these Gentiles by launching into a discussion that is all about his death, all about the cross, all about judging evil, driving out, as Jesus put it, the prince of this world (v.31) and bringing the fruit of new life. He begins with talking about his “hour” having finally arrived. Several times in John’s gospel, Jesus has proclaimed, or John reveals, that his hour had not yet arrived, (2:4; 7:30; 8:20). But now, that “hour,” that reason for his coming, that event to which his entire ministry had been pointing, was at hand. It would be the hinge of history. It was all about his glorification, and it would come because he would refuse to seek his

own glory but would allow himself to be sacrificed for the sin of the world. What would this sacrifice accomplish? Amazingly, it would bring new life.

Illustration: To illustrate, Jesus used the example of a seed that needed to be buried and die so that new fruit would be produced. I'm told that when the tombs of the Pharaohs of Egypt were discovered and opened, 3,000 year old grains of wheat were found. But they were absolutely the same as any grain of wheat you would see today because they had not been planted, they had not died and so had accomplished nothing. Each remained only a single seed. But the death of Jesus would bear fruit, it would result in a harvest of salvation of all who would put their trust in him. What's more, it would be a harvest that would bring new life for both Jew *and* Gentile as through his death Jesus would draw the "whole world," that is, all people (vv. 32-33) to himself.

Do you desire to see Jesus? To see him clearly, you need to know that in his "hour," Jesus did not come to defeat the Romans with force. Nor was he a good man who simply got swallowed up in a political battle or lost in a miscarriage of justice. Rather, he came for the purpose of defeating sin and death through the sacrifice of his life. It was unexpected. It wasn't what the crowd thought a true liberator should do. But Jesus turned the palms of Jewish nationalism into a cross of kingdom citizenship in order to bring about the kind of liberation we all need. The expected triumph, turned tragedy, turned into a greater triumph than anyone in the crowd could have imagined.

III. Walking in the Way of the Cross

A. Not to be missed in looking at this bigger picture is a bit of direction from Jesus for how this death turned into life is to affect us on a daily basis: *Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant also will be* (vv. 25-26). As I hear these words, I think back on our prayer of invocation, a long-standing prayer of the church: "Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace" (*The Book of Common Prayer*). Walking in the way of the cross doesn't seem all that attractive, does it? As Barbara Brown Taylor once put it, "I want to stop about a day short of following Jesus all the way." But Jesus tells us that going all the way, the way to death, is really the way of life, beginning now and leading on into life eternal. Let's parse this out for a moment.

B. "Love" and "hate," as Jesus uses them, are meant as comparative terms. It's a call to get things in their proper order. It's a call to put following Jesus first, surrendering our wills to his. Following Jesus' illustration of the seed which needs to die in order to bear fruit, it's a call to ask ourselves what in our life needs to die so that we may truly live. In another place, Jesus puts it like this: *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me* (Luke 9:23). Certainly, on the cross Jesus did what he did in a unique way, standing alone against the power of sin and death in our place. But he also was pioneering a route along which his followers must travel if we are to experience the new life that he brings. To take up our cross is to seek to do the will of God.

C. Paul puts this call in blunt terms in his letter to the Colossian church. "Since then you have been raised with Christ [since you have received this gift of new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus] . . . Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed . . . anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." In the place of such things, "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved [as those for whom Jesus has died], clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another . . . as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:1-13).

D. In other words, in order to truly live, we must die. It's a call to think about what we need to put to death so that we can live a truly whole life in our marriage, our family, our job, our neighborhood, our church. It's a scary prospect because it can mean putting to death things we have grown to love. And it's a daily process because new stuff that needs to die pops up all the time. And it's a challenging process because old stuff we thought was dead can sometimes seem like it has come back from the grave! But it's not something we have to do alone on our own strength. We have the community of faith to walk with us, and we have the Spirit of God Jesus has given us. Furthermore, if we can see it, it's also a freeing and healthy process because it will lead us to experience the fruit of the life that is truly life that Jesus has come to bring.

Do you desire to see Jesus? The more we can see the nature of his sacrificial death, the more we can understand the way in which he turned the palms into a cross, the more we will be able to see the new life that he offers. May we indeed find that the way of the cross is none other than the way of life and peace.