

We wish to see Jesus

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2009.

They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' John 12:21

Some years ago, I was a guest preacher in a church and when I entered the pulpit for the sermon, there was a plaque that read, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." It was a reminder to all preachers that we are to bring people to see and know Jesus.

As Lent draws to a close, we are drawn into the drama of the events of Jesus' final days. At he completes his ministry he knows he must turn toward Jerusalem. He faces a triumphant welcome only to be put on trial as a common criminal a few days later. What lies ahead is so fearsome that we can understand why he agonizes over having to allow himself to suffer the humiliation and sacrifice of the cross. There will be people standing around jeering him in the same way as those who wait outside the gates of a prison to cheer when a body is carried out after an execution. It is a perversity in human nature that delights in seeing others suffer, even under the guise of justice. As Jesus anticipates his grisly death he is understandably afraid, even though he knows that it is necessary to fulfill his mission.

For now, people are arriving in the holy city of Jerusalem to attend the Passover festival in the temple. Among them are the Greeks who join the crowd in the court of the Gentiles to listen to Jesus. They hunger for more than the vagueness of mystery cults with their myriad of deities. The teachings of Socrates and Plato don't do anything for them. They want to be brought personally close to the one God of the ancient patriarchs and prophets. Where the Socratic and Platonic philosophies leave them with more questions than answers, Jesus has answers to many questions while enabling us to live with the questions for which there are no answers. Faith is not a commodity to be purchased; it can never be handed to us. True faith only comes to us in our personal encounter with God.

In their search for faith, the Greeks ask Philip to bring them to Jesus. Their request to meet him is born out of their desire to be brought closer to God. Their request reminds us that one-on-one evangelism is still the most effective way to bring people to Christ. Many of you have told me how you were invited here to this church. Of all the mega-churches built by televangelists and of all the stadium rallies ever held, one person reaching out to invite another to share the faith of Christ is still the most effective form of evangelism. The Jehovah's Witnesses know that. The Mormons know that. And we know that.

Greek philosophical thinking placed little value on the present life. They believed that the soul was imprisoned in the body and longed to be released. Jesus' message is compatible with the Hellenistic emphasis of the spiritual over the material. In calling us to follow him, Jesus is asking us to put our most basic instincts into perspective. He is telling us that if we dwell on our instinct for self-preservation and if we give priority to our own concerns we will lose any meaning to our life, but if we place our faith in the realm of the spiritual we gain a life with meaning that is worth living.

The people of Israel have high expectations for a military conqueror and political liberator who will defeat their enemies and restore their fortunes. But the paradox is that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. That is difficult for them to understand and accept. What Jesus is

teaching is that if we live solely for our own sake we will lose any meaning in our lives and if we live for the sake of others we will find true meaning that makes life worth living. Such a view contradicts all common sense by human standards but makes every bit of sense by God's standards. Life is full of paradoxes; those who seek meaning will find it by looking beyond themselves while those who live only for themselves will be unfulfilled.

There is an old tradition at the ordination of a priest for the ordinand to lie face down on the floor before the altar and be covered with the funeral pall that covers a casket. This is to emphasize that service to others in Christ means death to self. When Jesus talks about hating our own life, he means that a life lived only for our selves amounts to nothing compared to a life lived for others.

I have often felt the benefits of being the third of four brothers growing up. Four sons in the same household learned to assert our selves and establish our identities. We learned to be considerate of others while we have always remained in touch and have been there for each other in times of need.

So much of the conflict in the world today is motivated by religious zealots and extremists who corrupt the true meaning of religion by seeking power for them selves and retribution against others over ancient grudges. There is something in the human psyche that harbors long time grudges to justify their desire for power through violence. Corrupting religion to seize political power it is a lethal combination that begets endless violence, death and destruction. This insanely selfish point of view creates a culture of hatred and violence that has resulted in generations of people in war torn countries who have never known anything but violence and death. It takes more than a war to turn a culture of conflict and violence into a one of peace and security.

Our own culture of consumerism and greed has brought about the present economic crisis. The creed of greed that has dominated the past generation has wrought havoc and has brought us to the brink of financial collapse not seen since the great depression. A whole new generation has to adopt a simpler and more stringent life style. Jesus' own life is the best model for living more simply by emphasizing spiritual values over material acquisition.

Springtime is finally here and we welcome the sight of new life sprouting up through the ground after the long, cold winter. Signs of new life are all around. The poet T.S. Eliot wrote:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow.

The Wasteland, 1922

Spring forces us to awaken from our long winter hibernation to a new life in Christ just as it forces new life up through the cold earth. As people of the resurrection, we are like the seed buried in the ground that brings new life. If we wish to see Jesus, we must first be buried to self so that we can be raised in the Christ's glory.