

[John 12:20-33](#)

‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’

These words that the Greek festival visitors address to Philip have been engraved on many a pulpit. It is the task of the preacher to help people see Jesus.

But, of course, what we mean by ‘seeing Jesus’ isn’t what they meant. And John, who was the master of multiple meanings in his Gospel, would have appreciated something like that. We cannot ‘see Jesus’ like they wanted to see him, in the flesh. After the Resurrection, when Jesus appears to Thomas, he tells him that those who believe without seeing are especially blessed. And that’s us.

We can still desire to see Jesus, in the sense of seeing him more truly as he is. And in that respect, Jesus has a surprise for us as well as for the Greeks, because it isn’t going to be like one of those ‘An Audience With’ television shows that ITV occasionally shows, where a famous entertainer delights a crowd of showbiz friends.

As usual, of course, Jesus turns everything on its head. He does introduce a way of speaking that might sound like he is up for ‘An Audience With Jesus’ – he talks about himself being glorified, and the Father being glorified. You can just feel the spotlights being cranked up on him, and the volume of razzamatazz being turned up, too.

But being seen by being glorified doesn’t amount to normal human categories for Jesus. You want to see him in all his glory? You’re in for a shock. You want to see the Father glorified, too? It won’t be on Hollywood’s terms.

So, **firstly, the glorification of Jesus**. When Jesus says that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (verse 23), he goes on to talk about grains of wheat only bearing fruit if they die (verse 24). Clearly his own fruitfulness will only come in his death, and because of that, it is his death in which he will be glorified. When he refers to being lifted up from the earth and [thus] drawing all people to himself (verse 32), the implication is that it refers to his being lifted up, not in conventional adulation, but rather lifted up on the Cross.

How on earth can we speak of Jesus being glorified on the Cross? It was a humiliating way to die, a specially invented form of torture. And to Jews it implied a curse, because Deuteronomy invokes a curse on anyone hung on a tree. No wonder Paul in 1 Corinthians was to say that Christ crucified was foolishness to the Greeks and a scandal to Jews. Yet, said Paul, that’s exactly what we preach, because it is the wisdom of God, and effectively that’s pretty much what Jesus says in our reading today.

But this, says Jesus, is the way he will draw all people to himself. And if his degrading means of death leads to that result, then I suppose that at least we should concede that the consequences of his death do lead to a glorious result. Thus Jesus should be praised.

What we don’t have, however, in this reading is *how* Jesus’ shameful death leads to such a magnificent conclusion. How can his death be like the grain that is sown into the soil and then bears much fruit?

Well, on the most basic of levels, we go back to that which we say so often about the Cross, but which becomes little more than a cliché or a truism for us. We return to our belief that Jesus died for the sins of the world. By dealing with the barrier of sin, he can draw people to himself and the Father.

Now perhaps you hear that and think, “I’ve been coming to church for decades and heard that thousands of times. Tell me something new.”

I would respond, we don’t need to hear something new. Human nature hasn’t changed, and no novelty will transform us. What we need is to take time to dwell on what Vicky Beeching calls ‘The wonder of the Cross’, and let that transform us.

For Jesus tells us in the passage that it isn’t simply a case of affirming a belief that his death brings him glory, because it is the means by which he brings all people to him. He tells us more than that. He tells us that the way of the Cross needs to shape our lives as well. Intellectual assent on its own is dry and impotent. The Cross must be accepted in our minds and in our very lives:

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. (Verses 25-26)

What might we do about this? I’m not suggesting that we go out of our way to look for suffering. That would be crazy. We learn elsewhere that even Jesus himself was horrified at the thought of his impending suffering.

But we are coming to the climax of Lent. We are into the final two weeks. Today is what we traditionally call ‘Passion Sunday’, where the word ‘passion’ doesn’t have its modern connotations of intense desires for sex. Rather, ‘passion’ here has its old meaning of ‘suffering’. This Sunday in particular we especially start turning our focus in Lent to the suffering of Jesus. It is time for us to engage with that story. Some Christians and some churches in this season make a habit of reading the entire narrative of Christ’s Passion from one of the Gospels. It is a way of getting inside the story, and letting the story shape us and our lives, as it must.

If the language of Christ dying for our sins has become like stale bread to you, then can I encourage you to try a discipline like that in these last two weeks of Lent? Pick a Gospel, and read everything from Palm Sunday on. Let it freshen your sense of wonder, and let it shape the ways in which you and I are being called to walk the way of the Cross by risking suffering as a result of following Jesus.

Secondly, we think about **the glorification of the Father**. Jesus’ prayer, asking the Father to glorify his own name (verse 28) is in the context of him saying that he will not ask the Father to save him from the terrible ‘hour’ to come (verse 27) and comes with a thunderous (verse 29) reply from the Father that was for the benefit of the crowds (verse 30):

“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” (verse 28)

So – the Cross will be the second time that the Father glorifies his own name. What might have been the first time, and what would the common thread be?

I am taking it that this glory is also connected to Jesus, and therefore I conclude that the Father glorified his name in the sending of his Son – in the Incarnation. At that time, Jesus showed the family likeness of the Father’s glory (John 1:14).

What is common to these two occasions? It is that they both form key parts of the Father’s giving of his Son, as in John 3:16, where God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. It’s what Jesus described after his Resurrection as the Father sending him. The Father is glorified in this giving or sending of Jesus.

I offer to you the thought that if the Father is glorified in his giving or sending of Jesus, then that paints a picture of the Father's love for the world. I talked a little bit about this last week at Knaphill when John 3:16 was part of the Lectionary Gospel reading. I used an illustration then about friends of mine who have watched their gifted son go to a fine grammar school and there develop his sense of calling to an army career. He is now at university in preparation for that, and I believe I'm right in saying his next stop after that is Sandhurst. I know his parents are proud of him, but I also know there are mixed feelings about the potential cost of military service. Nevertheless, in love, they have sent or given him.

Now while the Father's giving or sending of Jesus isn't quite the same as that, there is nevertheless the element of it that the Father gives up the Son to Incarnation, knowing that he will pay the ultimate price at the Cross. In that respect, we might reverently speak of the Father's heart of love being broken in this.

Therefore, however we read the meaning of the Cross, we cannot interpret it in the crude way of some Christians that makes it sound like Jesus acted in love to appease a vengeful Father. No: Father and Son acted together in love. Both in different ways suffered as a result of their love, even if we must freely admit that only the Son's pain receives explicit reference in the New Testament.

So as we mark Passion Sunday today, we mark the partnership in suffering love of the Father and the Son. They know that someone must absorb the consequences of sin; Jesus is willing to come and do that, and the Father, perhaps in sorrowful love, gives him up to that task. So definitely there is no opposition between Father and Son, but rather a common cause. As Paul was to say in his Second Letter to the Corinthians,

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

What, then, do we take away from all of this? We have already considered the thought that the glorifying of Jesus in his death leads to our lives being shaped by the Cross. More generally, the glory of God's self-giving leads us to a lifestyle in which we give ourselves up for God, his Gospel, and for others. It's something we apply to the whole of life.

Take our relationships, for example. It's easy for us to tie ourselves in knots about Paul's call for wives to submit to their husbands that we overlook his injunction to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church – in other words, husbands are to be willing to die for their wives. A profound self-giving is required of both. It's why the Methodist marriage service refers to the example of Christ as showing the glory of self-giving love. It's the model for all of our relationships in the home, at work, and in the church family.

This self-giving is the model for our mission, too. So often our talk about church is about what we get out of it. Too infrequently do we talk about what we give – and here I mean not only our attitude to worship and fellowship, but to what we together as church will give to the local community.

Here is one example. Southland Christian Church in Kentucky, USA [collects a dollar bill from each of its members each week](#), and they use that money purely to help people in need. Their senior pastor, Jon Weece, says,

“We've paid for surgeries, wheelchair-accessible vans and adoptions. It is so fun watching people who can't afford what they need get overwhelmed by the same love that overwhelms me: God's love.”

They are a large church – twelve thousand members – and can do things on a scale that our smaller churches cannot. They run free medical clinics, a school lunch programme, and a community garden. They provide tutors for students, run a prison ministry, and a garage for those who find it hard to pay the bills on their cars.

We can't do things like that, but what we can do is imbibe the same principles as them and put our versions into practice. How did Southland Christian Church end up operating like this? Jon Weece again:

“We decided we needed to take a season, read through the gospels and the book of Acts, look at the pattern of Jesus and the first church and pray and say, ‘God, what are we uniquely created to do in the Kingdom?’”

...

“We started focusing on people outside our four walls, and we found our niche. It was a catalytic season for us in that we determined we're here in central Kentucky to love people that no one else in our church community was paying attention to.”

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“People come in and we just tell them, ‘You know, we don't offer a lot internally for Christians. We're focusing on the people Jesus would want us to go after,’” he says.

So there we go. Shaped by the Cross, and giving ourselves to the world. That's what the church looks like when she reflects the glory of the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit.

Is that what we look like?