

## **Message for March 21, 2021**

John 12:20-33

I was leading the worship service in my Brighton congregation a number of years ago and the theme of my sermon that morning was clarity of vision; seeing Jesus, ourselves and even the world around us as we really are. The format of the service was very much like what we normally follow in both Boston and Omagh with the offering being taken up shortly after the sermon. The organist, who was elderly, was a very capable musician and always tried to play a piece of music that tied into the sermon's theme while the collection plates were being circulated. She usually succeeded but I was totally unprepared for her choice that morning. With the theme of clarity of vision in mind, she played a rendition of The Platter's great hit from the late 1950's, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes".

Well, whatever else I may have expected her to play, that certainly wasn't it! It was all I could do not to burst out laughing and even now after all of these years I still smile at the memory; indeed it came to mind while I thought about today's scripture passage.

It was just after the very first Palm Sunday and a group of Greeks who were visiting Jerusalem decided that they wanted to see Jesus. We don't know what their motivation was but they hesitated to approach Jesus directly. They were Greeks after all and so not a part of God's chosen people. What they decided to do then was ask someone to intercede on their behalf and they asked Phillip to do so, quite possibly because he had a Greek name. Phillip however didn't know if Jesus would be willing to meet these foreigners and so he in turn asked his good friend and fellow disciple Andrew to ask. This Andrew did but Jesus' response to their request was very odd to be sure. On the one hand Jesus didn't say yes, that he would love to meet with the Greeks but on the other hand Jesus didn't say no either. Instead, Jesus launched into a long and convoluted explanation about why he was going to die soon and then be raised from the dead.

I don't doubt that at this point Andrew and Phillip were shaking their heads in bewilderment. All they wanted to know was whether Jesus was willing to meet the Greeks and a simple yes or no answer would have been sufficient. Jesus'

response however was to talk about his impending death and resurrection. What sort of answer was that? Why it wasn't an answer at all! And yet while it may not be obvious at first, it was.

There is a well-known Christian song called "Open Our Eyes Lord" and the first verse goes:

Open our eyes Lord,  
we want to see Jesus.  
To reach out and touch Him,  
and say that we love Him.

As I just mentioned, this song is a popular one, probably because it expresses the desire of so many people. We want to see Jesus, experience him, and know him. And yet even so, it seems as if this is so much easier said than done. Indeed when I look at the bookshelf in my office, I see numerous books that offer to help me "see the real Jesus". At the end of the day though, there seems to be as many perceptions of Jesus as there are authors. In fact, looking at all of these books it seems as if everyone who looks at Jesus sees someone different, and it is hard to escape the impression that many of these writers simply see whatever they want to see. And yet having said that, we can still see the real Jesus.

To return to today's scripture passage, Jesus' response to those Greeks who wanted to see him is instructive. If we truly want to see Jesus, then we must do so through the cross *and* the empty tomb. This is to say, any account or interpretation of Jesus that does not take into account *both* Good Friday and Easter Sunday, is a distorted one. The cross and tomb are, as if it were, like the lens of a pair of glasses. If we take either lens or even both away, then we do not have an accurate picture and are not really seeing what is there. And what do we see when we look at the cross *and* the empty tomb?

God's amazing love for every single one of us, just as we are, faults and all. In Good Friday and Easter we see a love that knows no bounds and defies all common sense and logic. Why should God, the Almighty, even care about what happens to us human beings, never mind love us? Who are we and what are we to him? We are to God what tiny bugs are to us but even so, God still loves us

so much that he died for our sins and has made it possible for us to be with both him and our loved ones forevermore. Now this of course is a very familiar message to us and because it is, it may very well be that it no longer awes or excites us as much as it should. Such wasn't always the case though.

In the early days of our faith the very idea that God so loved the world that he gave his only son for our sakes was thought to be absolutely incredible. People in the ancient world found it almost impossible to believe that a god would love his creatures so much that he would become one of them, never mind willingly die for their sakes. And to willingly die by undergoing the most painful, shameful death imaginable, a death by crucifixion, and all this so that they might be forgiven and live with that god forevermore in paradise? This was unbelievable; no god would ever do that and the Christians were absolute fools for thinking so! Evidence of this point of view is to be found in underground Rome.

Amongst all the rest of the graffiti in the catacombs, there is one that depicts a donkey crucified on a cross with the figure of a man kneeling below it. Beneath the drawing is the caption, "Silvanus worships his god".

Now this is probably rather offensive to us but it does illustrate what the theologians call the great scandal of Christianity; the belief that God loves us so much that he willingly became one of us and died for our sakes. Many people in the ancient world, like some people today, really wanted to believe this and yet they could not. Still, this *is* the God that we dare believe in.

When we think about it, there is no logical or rational reason why God should love us so much; indeed when we think about our lives and the things that we've said and done there seems to be a lot of good reasons why God should not love us. Yet, since when was love ever logical or rational? And in addition there is no greater way to prove your love for someone than by being there, with them and for them. This is something that the missionaries of days gone by learned the hard way.

Years ago when the missionaries set out to win the world for Christ, they initially met with failure and even rejection. They didn't understand why at first since they had the good news of the gospel to share! They eventually realized

though that it wasn't necessarily what they were teaching that was the problem but rather how they interacted with the people who they hoped to convert. They spent the day evangelizing and then they returned to their comfortable missionary compounds in the evening. There they lived as if they were back in the UK or Europe. It was realized though that this sent the wrong message. If the missions were to succeed, then the missionaries would have to act like God and prove their love; prove it by living like them, living in the same type of homes as them and eating the same food for example. In short, if they truly wanted to demonstrate both theirs and God's love, they would have to become like one of them.

Now in a sense this is what God has done for us. It may have been easy enough for God to say that he loves us but, as the cliché puts it, actions speak louder than words. This is why the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The amazing mind-boggling love of almighty God is what the coming two weeks are all about. The love of God for each and every one of us is what we see when we truly see Jesus. And what is our response to such a love? Perhaps Isaac Watt said it best in one of his hymns:

Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

And so it does, and not just now at this special time of year either.