Sermon for 5th in Lent Year B

Readings: Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

i

The Pharisees know they are losing the battle against Jesus. After the raising of Lazarus they decide they must get rid of him. They step over the line from resisting him, ridiculing him, arguing with him and decide they have to kill him (John 11:53): ‘So from that day on they plotted to take his life.’ In John 12:10 the Jewish authorities include Lazarus in their murderous plot: ‘So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.’

Palm Sunday’s triumphal entry to Jerusalem just depressed them further: ‘See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him’ (John 12:19).

John then tells us the story of some Greeks seeking Jesus. Literally, the whole world is seeking him. We cannot know for sure who these Greeks were. They are ‘among those who went up to worship at the [Passover] feast’ (v20); this could mean they were proselyte Jews, but more likely they were ‘God-fearers’ – those drawn from gentile nations in admiration of the Jewish faith, but who had not been circumcised and who therefore could not participate in the feast itself, but merely look on from the side-lines. The historian Josephus tells us there were many such people attending the great festivals.

They are the first among countless millions who have been drawn to Jesus Christ. John writes his gospel and *Revelation* with a Greek audience particularly in mind. He tries to explain Jewish religious concepts and the new Christian perspective on those, but in a way that the Greek world might be able to understand. He makes this evident in the opening lines of his gospel by referring to Jesus as the Logos, the Word. It is no surprise he includes this story of Greeks coming to Jesus.

What these Greeks knew about Jesus to prompt their request to meet him is unclear. Perhaps they simply saw the welcome he received on Palm Sunday. Jesus sees their approach as another sign that his time is now close.

Satan had promised him the kingdoms of the world – at the cost of bowing down and worshipping him. Now Jesus saw the world beginning to come to him through his obedience to the Father and his supreme act of obedience and faith which now stood before him – the cross.

We have become so accustomed to Christianity being a world religion we are no longer amazed by its growth. It would be wider still if men and women everywhere had the freedom to follow whatever religion their hearts moved them to follow.

It will always be a challenge to those who wish to diminish Christ, for whatever reason, to dismiss the appeal of Christ across so many centuries and so many languages and cultures. The Church should have greater faith in the power of Christ to attract men and women to him. The story still changes lives; it still inspires hope; it still comforts the broken. A preoccupied, self-indulgent western world may not be listening at the moment, but wherever we see that comfortable world crumbling, we see the story finds its transforming power again.

ii

When Jesus hears of the Greeks who are wishing to speak with him, he launches into a declaration of praise. He announces the hour has come ‘for the Son of Man to be glorified’ (v20). This is no rallying cry to his secret army in the streets of Jerusalem to lynch the Pharisees, blockade the temple and arm themselves against Pilate’s troops. Instead, Jesus starts talking about the triumphal figure of the ‘Son of Man’ – a heroic, messianic figure in pre-Christian apocalyptic literature such as the *Book of Enoch* – dying like a seed in the ground.

This passage, which includes Jesus saying, ‘Now is my heart troubled’ (v 27), is the nearest John gets to the Gethsemane episode told by the other gospel writers. It reveals the true courage of Jesus. To feel true fear at the prospect of a gruesome, painful and humiliating death such as crucifixion and yet go ahead anyway is the mark of true courage. Jesus was no deranged fanatic who embraced death as a means of inflicting violence upon others.

We then have a peculiar couple of verses that are rather confusing.

There is a voice from heaven – endorsing Jesus’ understanding that it is God’s will that he goes to the cross. This would seem to be a voice of reassurance. Jesus has heard such a reassuring voice at other crucial moments in his ministry: at his baptism; at his transfiguration and now as he faces the days leading up to the cross.

Yet Jesus says the voice is not for his benefit, but for the crowd. Perhaps this means that Jesus needed no further reassurance by this stage – which is the point made in the Gethsemane stories in the other gospels: Jesus really did feel the fear that any sane person would feel at the prospect of such a death – but found the inner strength to go on anyway.

If the voice was indeed intended for the crowd, it didn’t fully achieve its purpose. For many did not understand the words. Some thought they had heard thunder; some thought perhaps an angel had spoken to Jesus. May we assume John understood the voice? Or was this understanding gained only after the resurrection?

Jesus seems to think that the crowd should have understood the voice, if it was indeed for their benefit. Perhaps we should cultivate the art of discerning the voice of God. Few indeed hear a voice in the classic sense. William Barclay tells the story of Cosmo Lang who later became the archbishop of Canterbury. On one occasion at Cuddesdon College in Oxford, Lang claims to have heard a voice speak to him in the chapel, saying, ‘You are wanted.’ I have known one or two others with similar stories to tell.

More prosaically, God speaks to most of us most of the time through passages of scripture, prayers we hear in church, the voice of others, an inner voice of conviction that is confirmed by events and so on. But that we hone our inner faculties, what Wesley described as the ‘spiritual senses’, to discern the word of God must be a priority for every believer. The Methodist Class meeting was organised for this very purpose.

Many in the crowd that day had clearly lost that art, or never cultivated it, for they mistook the word meant for them for merely thunder. How many times do we miss what God is saying to us because we have not cultivated our ‘spiritual senses’ to hear and to understand?

iii

The Greeks first approached Philip – perhaps because he had a familiar Greek sounding name. Philip presents them to Andrew who will take them to Jesus. This is the priestly role portrayed before our eyes. Priests connect the world with the divine and the divine with the world.

Our passage today from Hebrews 5:5-10 speaks more fully about the nature of Christ’s priesthood. He can identify with the people of the world and represent them fully because Jesus became fully human and has experienced the same pain and worries as other humans. He has shown this by the obedience he has learned through facing up to the cross.

Yet Jesus can also represent God to the world like no other before him or since because Jesus is the divine Son who now sits beside God the Father on the throne of grace. It is this combination of being the ultimate ‘Son of Man’ – the heroic saviour figure, and the royal ‘Son of God” that means the priesthood of Jesus is unsurpassable. He is eternally our greatest High Priest – the reference is to the mysterious Melchizedek, a priest-king who ministered to Abraham in Genesis 14.

All people ordained into priesthood share in the priesthood of Christ. Ordained priests convey the people’s needs before God and convey God’s offer of grace to the people. The ordained are the priests to the priestly people of God. For the baptised share in the priesthood of Christ, and are commissioned to intercede for the needs of the world and to declare the love of God to the world.

Jesus did not claim such honour for himself;

No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him: ‘You are my Son, today I have become your father.’ And he says in another place: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’

Our role is a priestly one. The ordained act as priests to the priestly people of God; they take responsibility for the sacramental and worship life of the people; the baptised people of God in their turn act as priests in their witness and service to the world.

Are you sufficiently active in your faith for the world to recognise you as someone who might lead them to Jesus? If not, why not?

You do not have to know all the answers yourself to act as Philip acted. If you cannot lead them to Jesus yourself, you should certainly know someone who can. Who is the Andrew to whom you would turn? Unless you play your part in the chain, how is the world ever to meet Jesus?

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard – April 2017**