

JESUS' GLORY AND OUR HONOR

John 12:20-33

This happened in Jerusalem during what we know as Holy Week. Jesus had entered in the triumph of the day we now celebrate as Palm Sunday. Jews from all over the world had gathered there for the Passover. We are not told why Greeks were there. Maybe it is like what I do on Christmas Eve when it is late and becomes early Christmas morning. The last Christmas Eve TV services are Roman Catholic and while I am not Catholic and don't understand Latin or whatever language they are speaking and hardly understand what they are doing I am curious to watch it.

Maybe these Greeks were there because Passover is such a major religious celebration with hundreds of thousands jammed into the city. They can watch without getting involved, as seems to be a trend today in American culture. All we know is that they asked to see Jesus but are not listed as those who followed the Jewish law or had come to follow Jesus. It appears that they were not there to serve Jesus or to honor him so much as a meet and greet opportunity, like when presidential candidates start making their way through New Hampshire.

When we lived there I was invited to meet presidential candidates such as John McCain and Dan Quail. Politicians soon learn that meeting them and voting for them is quite a different thing. Many go to hear interesting candidates even if they have no intention of voting for them. Maybe it is like people who want to go and hear Rick Warren or Joel Osteen. They are not going to give their heart to Rick Warren or Joel Osteen, but they are just curious.

Part of our ministry is to help those outside the faith to see Jesus. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," said the Greeks to Philip. Jesus is still to be seen in the lives of his followers. There is a story about a businessman who was invited to speak at a local church on the topic, "Thou shalt not steal." The next morning, he boarded a city bus for his usual ride to work. He handed the

driver a five dollar bill and received some change, which he counted as he went to his seat.

He discovered he had received a quarter too much. He returned to the driver, handing the quarter back and saying, "You gave me too much." To his surprise, the driver said, "I know. I gave it to you on purpose, and watched you in the mirror as you counted the change. I heard you speak yesterday about your faith and being honest. I wanted to see if you really meant what you said."

The Greeks came to see Jesus, perhaps to see if there was integrity in what he said and what he did. But instead Jesus wanted to talk about his death. We enter into part of our faith which is hard to understand. I am going to guess that for Greeks and Jews, believers and non-believers, disciples and opponents, his message did not make sense. The suffering of God and our suffering being intertwined is just too much for us to comprehend. As a great theologian of last century, Karl Barth, said, "Here is a truth we cannot understand – we can only stand under this truth."

It is more than a little difficult to connect glorification and death. Yet Jesus said his glorification has to do with his death. Maybe that is why Jesus used the illustration of the seed dying in order to give life. It would seem Jesus was not interested in spectators but in disciples who follow the way of the cross, dying to self as seeds die to give birth.

This is a difficult lesson because of our instincts toward self-preservation. Medications to avoid pain and discomfort and lengthen life are a major part of our national economy. Jacob, age 85, and Rebecca, age 79, were all excited about their decision to get married. They went for a stroll to discuss the wedding. On the way they pass a drugstore. Jacob suggests that they go in. He addresses the man behind the counter: "Are you the owner?" The pharmacist answered, "Yes."

Asked Jacob: "Do you sell heart medication?" Pharmacist: "Of course we do." Jacob: "How about medicine for circulation?" Pharmacist: "All

kinds.” Jacob: “Medicine for rheumatism?” Pharmacist: “Definitely.” Jacob: “Medicine for memory?” Pharmacist: “Yes, a large variety.” Jacob: “What about vitamins and sleeping pills?” Pharmacist: “Absolutely.” 85-year-old Jacob looked at his 79-year-old wife-to-be then looked at the pharmacist and said: “Perfect! We’d like to register here for our wedding gifts.”

We spend great sums of money to keep alive but Jesus said God glorified his death. Once a student finished seminary and received an appointment from the bishop for the church he was to serve, but the student complained because the appointment did not fit what he felt he deserved. Another student, loving but unsympathetic, patted him on the back and said, “You know the world is a better place because Michelangelo didn’t say, ‘I don’t do ceilings.’” Jesus did not offer an invitation to success or comfort but to service and the cross and death.

We honor Jesus in sacrificial service in his name, be in a friendly visit or a voice in the choir or a hand writing a check or making a meal for a sick friend. At a recent meeting of the Hyannis Rotary, Milton Penn, whom some of us know as the proprietor of Puritan Clothing, made a remark to the effect, “You can tell it is a real charity. No one thanks you and you never get a receipt.” There is something to that. It is always nice to be thanked, but giving and getting recognition takes something away from what we do if we are doing it to honor and glorify God. Why should you thank me for what I am doing for God? It is my honor to serve him.

After announcing his death and telling us to serve as he served Jesus said, “My time has come.” A sense of time is so important, but sometimes also troubling. A man had been driving all night and by morning was still far from his destination. He decided to stop at the next city he came to, and park somewhere where it was quiet so he could get an hour or two of sleep. As luck would have it, the quiet place he chose happened to be on one of the city’s major jogging routes. No sooner had he settled back for a snooze when there came a knock on his window.

He looked out and saw a jogger running in place. “Yes?” he said. “Excuse me, sir,” the jogger, said, “do you know the time?” The man looked at the car clock and answered, “8:15.” The jogger said thanks and left. The man settled back again, and was just dozing off when there was another knock on the window and another jogger. “Excuse me, sir, do you know the time?” asked the jogger. “8:25!” the man replied. The jogger said thanks and left.

Now the man could see other joggers passing by and he knew it was only a matter of time before another one disturbed him. To avoid that, he got out a pen and paper and put a sign on his window saying, “I do not know the time!” Once again he settled back to sleep. He was just dozing off when there was another knock on the window. “Sir, sir?” said a jogger, seeking to be helpful, “it’s 8:45.”

As Jesus spoke of the coming hour of his death there was a dramatic break in the story. Jesus said to his Father, “Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder they heard. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” And knowing the time has come for sacrifice and suffering for us is unwelcome news.

It reminds me a bit of what we say to our dogs and what they actually hear. We might see some chewed up newspaper on the floor and say, “Do not chew the newspaper. We have given you bones and toys to chew. If you do that again we are going to lock you in your cage.” What they hear is: Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” To those who believed angels spoke and those who thought it was just a noise Jesus again focused on the cross.

Bishop William Willimon tells the story of one Lent in a church he served as pastor when he wanted a processional cross for worship. He had in mind something simple, modern and clean, something congruent with that church’s minimalist architecture, something light enough for a white-robed adolescent to carry on Sundays. What he got on the first Sunday of Lent

was a dramatic sort of cross, heavy, complete with a realistic, bleeding corpus, a hanging, crucified Christ, blood and everything.

Some managed to like it because a nice person had made it. Some liked it because they appreciated the intricate carving. But many were upset because it was “more Catholic than Methodist,” “gory and depressing,” or didn’t “go with our colors.” So Reverend Willimon asked, “What is a modern, progressive, slightly liberal, well-budgeted church to do with a bloody cross these days?”

The Greeks wanted to see Jesus. What will we show those who seek to see him? When people come to the building I will say, “See the entrance. It is attractive and accessible making it easier for you to enter.” When they look in the church I will say, “See the sanctuary, how large and handsome it is. It is a pleasure to behold.” Then I will say, “Look up and see the pineapple, a symbol of hospitality. We are the friendly church.” But I don’t find myself saying, “Look at the cross. It reminds us of Jesus’ sacrifice and ours. We are a people who sacrifice and suffer for others.”

Theologian H. Richard Niebuhr condemned cross-less Christianity whether it is promoted by liberal Protestantism or the evangelical feel good, seeker-sensitive churches. It is a false gospel in which, as Niebuhr says speaks of, “A God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”

The cross is not something we understand. It is a mystery of God. It is something we can look up at and it has a power we can accept which draws all people to Christ. It bears the message that people whose lives are centered on self will lose them, because the Father will not honor them. People whose lives are centered on service even at the cost of sacrifice will keep them, because the Father will bless them with eternal life.

Philip Yancey is one of my favorite Christian writers who have authored many helpful and inspiring books. He began his career as a journalist. And as a journalist, he interviewed diverse people. Looking back, he divides

these diverse people into two types: stars and servants. In this book *Where Is God When It Hurts?* he wrote: “The stars include NFL football greats, movie actors, music performers, famous authors, TV personalities, and the like. These are the people who dominate our magazines and our television programs. We fawn over them, poring over the minutiae of their lives: the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the aerobic routines they follow, the people they love, the toothpaste they use.”

Yet Yancey says that, in his experience, these “idols” are as miserable a group of people as he has ever met. “Most have troubled or broken marriages. Nearly all are hopelessly dependent on psychotherapy. In a heavy irony, these larger-than-life heroes seem tormented by incurable self-doubt.” And I noted in a recent issue of *Sports Illustration* that something like three-quarters of professional athletes are broke within 5 year of finishing their careers.

Yancey has also spent time with servants. “People like Dr. Paul Brand, who worked for twenty years among the poorest of the poor, leprosy patients in rural India; or health workers who left high paying jobs to serve in a backwater town in Mississippi; or relief workers in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, or other such repositories of world-class human suffering; or the Ph.D.’s scattered throughout jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages.”

Yancey says he was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to hold them up as inspiring examples. He was not, however, prepared to envy them. But as he now reflects on the two groups side by side, “stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, spending their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. But somehow in the process of losing their lives they have found them. They have received the peace that is not of this world.”

Yancey goes on to say that when he thinks of the great churches he has visited, “what comes to mind is not an image of a cathedral in Europe. These are mere museums now. Instead, he thinks of an inner-

city church in Newark with crumbling plaster and a leaky roof, of a mission church in Santiago, Chile, made of concrete block and corrugated iron. In these places, set amidst human misery, he says he has seen Christian love abound.

When Jesus spoke of how he will be lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself, his words still define our life and ministry and what we are to look to and point to. We too need to see Jesus, not just Jesus the religious leader or teacher or a great man to be respected. We need to see Jesus lifted up on the cross as the savior of the world. It is he who suffered and died and conquered death for us. It is for us now to honor him and his sacrifice by serving him.

March 29, 2009

The Federated Church of Hyannis

Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor