

**Sermon: Christ Church, South Yarra,
Lent 5, 29/3/09
Lection: Jer. 31:31-4, Heb. 5:5-14, Jn. 12:20-33.**

What hour are you at in your Lenten journey? Do you feel that you are truly just beginning, or do you feel as though the process of penance and discipline is becoming overburdening? Perhaps, after Refreshment Sunday last week, you feel a sense of renewed determination to try to observe your discipline, since the end is fast approaching!

Or, perhaps you have been ignoring Lent altogether?

Lent is not just about observing a discipline, it's also about paying attention: noticing what happens to you in your journey through the process.

Have you been paying attention?

Do you really what moment of your Lenten journey you are in?

For the author of this morning's Gospel reading, there was something incredibly important in recognising the moment in which you are placed. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus has been responding to claims upon his Messianic identity with the phrase, 'my hour has not yet come'. Then, seemingly all of a sudden, the tune changes: the hour has come and is present: Jesus responds in grief, instruction, and then departure from public ministry. As John tells the story, this is the last public encounter between the Jews and Jesus until they meet again in the Garden of Gethsemane.

'The hour has come for Son of Man to be Glorified'.

What prompted this sudden and unexpected response?

The catalyst comes from a seemingly inconsequential event: a group of Greeks came to the disciples asking to see Jesus. Ok, so what: who are these men?

We are told that these men have come up to Jerusalem to observe the Passover. Thus, they were presumably '**God-fearers**'; non-Jews who recognised the value of the Hebraic Faith, and sought to be involved, but - due to their ethnicity - could only ever linger on the fringes. As the Greek-speaking world came in more regular contact with Jewish religion, some realised in Jewish monotheism a religious perspective which seemed more life-affirming and realistic than the complex structure of their own culture. They were the eager 'converts' of their time. Yet, the religious strictures of the Hebraic Faith meant that, since their racial background was foreign, they could never be fully received in to the Jewish Faith, which saw the chosen people of God as ethnically defined.. Thus, the Greeks, and other converts, lingered at the edges of the Synagogues and temples, involved as observers, not as participants.

At St. Paul's Cathedral (Melbourne), we see somewhat similar figures, who loiter in the Narthex, or the back pews, fascinated by the liturgy, but refusing to become more involved. Thankfully, in the church, we welcome them, and encourage their interest and involvement: the barrier to involvement is placed by themselves. For the Greeks, the Jewish religion placed an institutional and unbreakable barrier to their full involvement, but tolerated their status as onlookers.

Thus, these Greeks in the Gospel have come to Jerusalem to observe the Passover, trying to honour the traditions, whilst being unable to take any part than onlookers.

Why would such minor and unimportant figures even rate a specific mention in John's gospel? Is this a comment about inclusion, or did they do anything particularly important?

We are told that they go to Phillip - a disciple with a Greek name, and he then in turn goes to Andrew - his fellow townsman. Yet, despite this complex application process, we are not told if the Greeks do actually gain audience with Jesus. The incident is not really a great illustration of Jesus' inclusive ministry. That, therefore, cannot be the important factor.

What is important is that these seekers of Jesus are Greeks, or Gentiles. In the Jewish binary understanding of the world, there were two types of people: Jews, and non-Jews. Greeks, then, are representative of the rest of humanity other than the Jews. Thus in telling of their seeking, the evangelist here utilises these 'non-Jews' as the symbol of the universal implications of Christ's ministry and sacrifice. It is not intrinsically important for the symbolism whether the Greeks had an intense conversation with Jesus or not. What is important is that they recognised his importance. The hour that John has shown Jesus awaiting has finally come.

The Greeks' desire to meet Jesus embodies the extension of Christ's ministry and teaching beyond purely Jewish circles to an international audience, and thus illustrates the universality of Christ's saving actions.

Here we have our first piece of good news from this passage: In Christ, the old dichotomy of Jew and Gentile is broken down. The glorification of Christ, the Son of Man, is not something only for the Jews, but for **all** people - even we, the spiritual descendants of those inquiring Greeks. We may all follow after Jesus, seeking out relationship with the Christ: for his message of salvation is one which is for us, and for all people.

Yet, the message of Christ at this pivotal hour within the Johannine gospel is interestingly phrased:

'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit'.

Death brings forth newness of life. I am sure that this was not the Messianic message that the followers of Jesus were expecting. It sounds rather contrary to common sense! However, the gospel evangelist, and all we, who have read of Jesus, know all too well, exactly what Jesus is talking about. We have the advantage of foreknowledge, and thus understand what he means by the 'lifting up' of the Son of Man. The lifting up is about Jesus' Crucifixion, and Resurrection: a raising up upon the earth in order to raise humanity's prospects from earth-bound, in Death, to heaven-wards, in Resurrection.

Indeed, we, who are into the later hours of our Lenten journey, can already feel the shadow of the Cross looming upon our liturgical horizon, just as the narrator paints the same shadow in to the dialogue between Jesus and the confused bystanders.

Yet, in understanding our own hour, we must acknowledge that, not only does the Shadow of the Cross fall liturgically upon the path before us, but it also falls upon the narrative path of Faith behind each one of us. We who, like the gospel evangelist, stand on the far side of the Crucifixion and Resurrection looking back, have somehow, experienced our whole world changed by the shadow of that Man lifted up falling across our path. Somehow, something in this crucified saviour has struck us as worth seeking out for further investigation, just as our Greek precedents came to Phillip, seeking out the man they thought was worth even merely sighting. For each of us, the shadow of the cross has - in some way or other - effected our lives enough to drag us out of bed on a Sunday morning to stand in a draughty building alongside a eclectic bunch of people, involved in something which a large part of society now thinks is utterly weird.

For, somehow, each one of us dares to hope that, despite all contradiction to our rational understanding, that historical moment of Crucifixion, which has so captured our lives, is the very act of **God writing a new law of Love for us**, no longer on tablets of stone, but on our very hearts. In that lifting up upon the cross, we perceive God promising in covenant,

“ I will be your God, and you shall be my people“.

We may not truly understand, or comprehend how Crucifixion works as covenant, or as salvation, and there are a number of ways to explain the mechanics of the Crucifixion and Resurrection as salvation. **None of them** will ever give us the full understanding - only God holds that particular interpretation. That doesn't, however, mean that we can't respond to the effect of encountering the Crucifixion: that we can't walk on in our journey towards a truly lived Faith. Indeed, we must walk on - for God is journeying with us, right alongside.

In today's Gospel we are shown Christ attending to the moment, and in so doing recognising what John terms 'the hour'. In attending to details of what is around, we are shown Jesus identifying where this particular moment fits within a much larger story, and responding.

Attending to the present moment can be a life-changing event.

What of your moments in your journey of Faith? Are you attending to messages from God within other moments, or just passing them by?

Perhaps, like the onlookers in the Gospel, we are misinterpreting the voice of God, when it speaks, perceiving thunder instead of revelation.

And God doesn't always speak to us in a thunderous voice from on high.

Richard Giles, discussing liturgical renewal, points out that God can be speaking in otherwise mundane voices:

'Because God is ridiculously generous , He somehow fixes it so that, however cluttered (everything else around is), there will be a little gem hidden for us. A germ of an idea, a helpful practice (revealed by someone else), or perhaps just a glorious smile, in which God is revealed'.

Attend to the details of the present: God may well be speaking to you in an unexpected voice.

As for this gospel passage and Lent?

All of Lent is about meditating upon the effect of the shadow of the cross falling upon our lives. We are as a community on the verge of meditating upon the path of the Passion: surely now is the appropriate **hour** to reflect upon the effect of the Cross within our lives.

“ This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this World, now the ruler of this world shall be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up, shall draw all people to myself.”

Through the Cross, God has drawn you lovingly to God's self.

Attend to that moment, again, and again and again.

Amen.

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