

We wish to see Jesus

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2015.

They came to Philip... and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

John 12:21

Some years ago, I was a guest preacher in a church and as I stepped into the pulpit, there was a plaque before me that read, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." It was there to remind the preacher that our primary focus is to bring people to Jesus. All preachers have their favorite themes and issues, but we all need to remember that we primarily need to bring people to Jesus.

As this Lenten season draws to a close, we are drawn into the drama of the events of Jesus' final days. Approaching the completion of his ministry, Jesus now sets his face toward Jerusalem. He will receive a triumphant welcome into the holy city of Jerusalem only to be put on trial as a common criminal a few days later. What lies ahead is so fearsome that it taxes the imagination to realize how he will endure his suffering and humiliation. There will be people jeering him in the same way as those who wait outside the gates of a prison when a body is carried out after an execution. It tells us that there is a perversity in human nature that delights in seeing others suffer, even under the guise of justice. As Jesus anticipates his grisly death he is understandably afraid even though he knows that it is necessary to fulfill his mission.

Among the Jews arriving in the holy city of Jerusalem to attend the Passover festival are Greeks who gather in the court of the Gentiles. The teachings of Socrates and Plato don't do anything for them because they leave them with more questions than answers. The mystery cults with their myriad of deities are too vague. They long for a personally close relationship to the God of the ancient patriarchs and prophets. They will find that Jesus has universal answers to the meaning of life, enabling them to live with those questions for which there are no answers. Faith is neither a commodity to be purchased nor can it be claimed through anyone else. No one can tell you what to believe. True faith comes by way of our own personal encounter with God.

In their search for that closer relationship to God, the Greeks ask Philip to bring them to Jesus. This was the beginning of one-on-one evangelism, still the most effective way to bring people to Christ. You know what this means if you were brought here by someone invited you. Of all the mega-churches built by televangelists and of all the stadium rallies ever held, one person inviting another to church is still the most effective form of evangelism. The Jehovah's Witnesses know it. The Mormons know it. And we know it and there is no need to be reluctant. It is said that if you cross a Jehovah's Witness with an Episcopalian, you get someone who knows how to knock on the door, but doesn't know what to say!

Greek philosophical thinking placed little value on the present life. They believed that the soul was imprisoned in the body only to be released at death. This makes Jesus' teachings compatible with the Hellenistic emphasis on the spiritual over the material world. Jesus asks us to put our most basic instincts into perspective. If we dwell on our instinct for self-preservation and give priority to ourselves over everything else we lose any meaning in life, but if we give priority in service to others we gain a life worth living.

When Jesus spoke of the kingdom, there were those who had expectations that he would be a military conqueror and political liberator who would defeat their enemies and restore the fortunes of Israel. The paradox is that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world and it was difficult for them to understand and accept. What Jesus teaches is that if we live solely for our own sake we will lose any meaning in our lives and if we live for the sake of others we will find what makes life worth living. Such a view contradicts all common sense by human standards but it makes every bit of sense by God's standards. The Christian life is full of paradoxes; those who seek meaning will find it by looking beyond themselves while those who live only for themselves will be unfulfilled.

There is an old tradition at the ordination of a priest for the ordinand to lie face down on the floor before the altar and be covered with the funeral pall that is used to cover a casket. This is to emphasize that true service to others means death to self. When Jesus talks about hating our own life, he means that a life lived only for our selves amounts to nothing compared to a life lived for others. One of the benefits I had in growing up as one of four brothers was that I learned early on the important lesson that I was not the center of the universe and realized that I need to be considerate of others.

There is something in the human psyche that harbors long time grudges. Religious extremists seeking retribution for ancient grudges motivate so much of the conflict in the world today. They corrupt the scriptures by justifying their violence that results in death and destruction. Insanely selfish behavior creates a culture of hatred and violence that results in generations of people in war torn countries who have never known anything but violence and death. It takes an enormous effort to turn a culture of conflict and violence into a one of peace and security. We are concerned about those police and law enforcement officers who overreact to a perceived threat and shoot to kill unarmed people with their hands up. The culture of fear dominates our thinking and leads to more senseless killings. a culture of common sense is needed where we learn not to be guided by fear, but by mutual respect.

Springtime is likely to come late this year because of the heavy snows. We anticipate the eventual sight of new life sprouting up through the ground after our long, hard winter. Spring forces new life that awakens the cold earth from the long winter hibernation. We are like the seed that must be first buried in the ground before it can spring to glorious new life. If we wish to see and know Jesus, we must first be buried to self before we can be raised in his glory.