

Text: John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

The Glorification of Jesus of Nazareth

John's gospel can be described as a *theological* portrayal of the life of Jesus based upon *historical* events. In other words the writer endeavors to explain the *meaning* of events as much as describing the events themselves. Today's reading is a typical example. John places this conversation immediately after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we will celebrate next week. The major Jewish feast day of the Passover is approaching, so Jerusalem is a hive of activity with many pilgrims visiting the Temple. Evidently some Greeks were part of the crowd. They may simply have been tourists to Jerusalem, rather than Greeks who had converted to Judaism. And they would have been certain to visit the Temple and to stand in the outer court of the Gentiles. How could you visit Jerusalem and not do that! Moreover, if they had witnessed Jesus arriving into Jerusalem on a donkey, their curiosity would have been aroused. And it would be natural that they would make their contact through Philip, a disciple with a Greek name.

How does Jesus respond to these Greeks, when they say to Philip, "We would like to see Jesus?"

The words John puts into the mouth of Jesus are very cryptic and deep. It seems, therefore, like a lost opportunity for Christ to spread his message to non-Jews! What is he saying? What does he mean? At the very end of his speech, in verse 32, Jesus says this: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all* people to myself." This final response would be certainly relevant to men and women from *all the nations*. However, what he says before that would have been shocking and surprising to everyone.

Jesus begins by saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (v23). Up until this point, the phrase "my hour has *not* yet come" occurs several times in John's gospel, beginning with the first miracle at the wedding of Cana.¹ But now, in Jerusalem, he understands what will happen in the near future and he says, "His hour has come."

Some Christians today, at reading this passage, would exclaim that, "Of course Jesus knew that he was about to die, because he was divine, God's Son, therefore *knew* everything!"² I suggest caution in surmising what Jesus *himself* knew *at the time*, and how the *writer* interprets events in light of the resurrection and many years of Spirit-inspired reflection. Despite John's strong emphasis that Jesus came from God - he was "the Word made flesh"³ - Jesus was, nevertheless, *fully human* too.⁴ Moreover, it took no special divine revelation to reveal what everyone in Israel *knew* happened to

¹ See John 2:14; 7:30;

² Indeed, the other gospel writers betrayed Jesus as *predicting* his own death, *as if* he already knew the future.

³ John 1:1,14.

⁴ Today's reading has, "Now my soul is troubled" (John 12:27). This is widely seen as John's Gethsemane moment. William Barclay writes: "Jesus is fighting the battle with his human longing to avoid the cross. No one wishes to die young, and no one wishes to die by crucifixion. Real courage does not mean not being afraid. It means being terribly afraid, and yet doing the thing that ought to be done."

messianic figures that came into the politically-charged environment of Jerusalem. Every Jew knew that such people would end up being killed by the Romans, and so Jesus also knew beforehand, from a purely human perspective, the risky journey that he was undertaking.

Again, John writes that Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” In using the phrase “Son of Man” Jesus was alluding to the apocalyptic vision in Daniel 7:13-14, which says:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. . . . He was given *authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him*. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

The Jews had an expectation that the golden “age to come” would be brought about by God’s direct intervention. The “Son of Man” was God’s champion who was being held on a leash, and that one day he would be released and would conquer the world. So *when* Jesus said, “The hour has come that the Son of Man must glorified,” people would have had tremendous anticipation of exciting, dramatic things to come. But that is not how Jesus meant *glorify*. He dashes that expectation in the very next breath – thus stunning his audience! Think about it for a moment: here is Jesus, in the vicinity of the Temple, in Jerusalem, he is the focal point of the popular drama of the triumphal entrance, at the time of year when people remembered God’s provision of a rescuer and their means of escape from oppression in Egypt, and hear again what Jesus says:

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”⁵

This is NOT what the audience were expecting (or wanting) to hear! Instead of political revolution and victory for Israel, Jesus talks about *death*. John is providing for his readers a brief theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ death through the words that Jesus spoke.

There are (at least) three influential models of that we often hear Christian’s using to explain the meaning of the cross. They are commonly identified as the ransom theory, the moral influence theory, and the substitution model. In the first model, Jesus pays the ransom price to liberate—or *redeem*—a slave in the secular marketplace.⁶ As Mark puts it, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” This is also mirrored in the Exodus: deliverance *from* bondage and slavery in Egypt *by* the blood of the Passover lamb *into* the Promised Land. In Abelard’s Moral Influence theory, Christ’s death reveals *God’s love* in such a powerfully compelling way that what we *ought* to do is respond in wonder and gratitude. As the last line of the hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” puts it: “Love so amazing, so divine, *demand*s my soul, my life, my all.” The third, substitution model has various forms, but one key perspective – formulated

⁵ John 12:24-25.

⁶ See Mark 10:45; 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Tim 2:6.

by John Calvin, and hence traditionally beloved by Presbyterians - is that Christ was a willing sacrifice to “appease the wrath of God.” Calvin, stressed that according to God’s own law, “the wages of sin is death”⁷ and hence our sin - anything less than perfection - demands *punishment*—death. God graciously initiates a way to rescue sinful humankind while ensuring that the legal penalty for disobedience is still satisfied. Building on the Hebrew image of sacrifice, the sinless Messiah becomes a scapegoat to carry the sin, guilt, and shame of the whole world. The manner of Christ’s brutal death as a condemned *criminal*, though he is in fact innocent, makes redemption a *penal substitutionary* act. The sinless Christ is, then, a *substitute for our punishment*, and hence – for Calvin – God’s justice is satisfied by the perfectly obedient Christ dying in our place.

It may surprise you that *none* of those models correlate with the way John’s interprets the cross. First, and perhaps oddly, Jesus is *not* portrayed as a victim, but is in complete control of events! And the word “sacrifice” is never mentioned. Second, the gospel writer emphasizes the metaphors of new birth and the new life in various places, such as in the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. Here we have that image again: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” Yes, there is a necessary and life-giving cost, but from that single death a whole new community is formed, which is what is meant by the “many seeds” or the “much fruit.” We read of a similar agricultural metaphor in John 15, where Jesus describes himself as the vine. John explains that the death of Jesus will certainly *look* like a tragedy, burying something that you will never see again. But given time, the result will become a triumph of God’s self-giving love because a beautiful, new plant will grow that will produce a harvest of Christ-like fruit. The great harvest of the worshipping nations envisioned in Daniel 7, will arise - in the end - through the death of a this particular kernel of wheat – that is, Jesus the “Son of Man.”

This message of “letting go and being willing to die in order to be successful and fruitful” creates a huge problem for us. That is because we want to hold on to *this* life so dearly – as if that is all there is to reality. Yet only if we are willing to die, and therefore are not afraid of dying, are we truly free to live! We are all called to follow Jesus, who was obedient to his calling, in the certain hope of the resurrection. That is truly challenging and can only be done if we are aware of the life-giving Spirit within us.

Another aspect of John’s interpretation of the cross is given in the following words of Jesus:

“Now is the time for judgment on this world; now *the prince of this world will be driven out*. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”⁸

He speaks of the “prince of this world – namely, Satan - being driven out.” This world lives in opposition to Jesus; it is in opposition to the reign of God. Jesus is about to encounter worldly powers, both religious and secular, that will – in the end – kill him. Yet, from John’s post-resurrection

⁷ Rom 6:23.

⁸ John 12:31-32. The “lifting-up” also signifies that Jesus will not be stoned for blasphemy, but executed by the Romans.

perspective, those evil powers are ultimately judged by the Messiah's faithful obedience to his divine mission, even to death on a cross, and the power of evil is overcome in the process. The depth of God's love for this messy, suffering world is revealed in Christ's costly death. But we must also make a connection with John 3:14-15, which says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the *Son of Man* must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."⁹ John is referring to the bronze snake on a pole that Moses "lifted up" in the wilderness so that anyone bitten by the poisonous snakes could look up to the bronze snake and be healed.¹⁰ In a similar way, by believing in the Jesus who was raised up on the cross, we too are healed or made whole – we are reconciled with God who is drawing all people to him.

Again, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*." What is this "glorification" that is so emphasized in today's reading? The glorification of Christ comes in three ways, first through being *lifted up on a cross*; second, being *raised up from the dead*, and, third, being *ascended into heaven* – or returning to the Father. The Greek word used for "lifting up" has a double meaning, in that it can mean literal "elevation," as on the cross, or "exaltation," as in honor or rank. Taken together, these are three, *upward* movements and *through* all three God is glorified, or revealed plainly to the world.¹¹ John makes this very point in the opening chapter:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. *We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*"¹²

It is through *this glorification* that the world itself is irreversibly changed and Godself is *revealed* to all, Jews and Greeks. The gospel writer begins his account with the incarnation, and so any movement towards reconciliation is therefore *initiated by God*. That self-emptying process by which God is enfleshed in human form eventually culminates in the crucifixion – in death. But this hour is not unexpected. No matter what the forces of evil will do to Jesus, they will not take his heart of love for his *Abba* Father.

John's interpretation of the cross is shocking, mysterious, and profound. The human "yes" in the faithful obedience of Jesus the Messiah meets the divine "yes" in the three-phase glorification of the Son of Man. In the end, though, the glorification of Jesus the Messiah is through self-giving, suffering love – and not just through the suffering servant, but the suffering of God.

The Greeks asked at the beginning, "We would like to see Jesus." The simple question is, "Would we?" If so, we must begin with the cross and be prepared to gaze on the One who was "lifted up from the earth" in order "to draw *all* people to himself." May we say today with John, "We have seen *his* glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Amen.

⁹ See also John 8:28. (And, perhaps, hear an echo of Isa 52:13,15.)

¹⁰ Num 21:4-9.

¹¹ This is "epiphany"! In Matthew, God being revealed to the Gentiles is in the visit of the magi at Christ's birth.

¹² John 1:14; see also John 17:1-5.