



seeing Jesus

Today we enter Passiontide, the final two weeks in this solemn, sacred season. It is fitting that this complex Gospel passage reflects something of this subtle yet seismic shifts in the story of Jesus final days on earth. It's a text rich in what we might call sound bites: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" ... "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" ... "Very truly, I tell you, 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 ... Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." ²⁶ "Whoever serves me must follow me" ... and that's just the first half!

It's been quite a momentous week, with ongoing speculation and concern over the use of a nerve agent in an assassination attempt on a former Russian spy and his daughter in an English cathedral town; the awe inspiring displays of determination, commitment, sheer hard work and willpower from the Winter Paralympics; and the death of legendary scientist Stephen Hawking. But my favourite sound bite this week comes from the four year-old adopted son of a friend and colleague who lives and works in Salisbury, as reported on Facebook, where he goes under the alias of 'Cub no. 2': "Accidentally bumped in to Theresa May doing her chatting to the public thing in Salisbury this afternoon whilst I was taking Cub no.2 to the dentists. She said: "Hello young man, I'm the Prime Minister and it's good to meet you." He said: "Well done you. But I'm on School Council and that's even more important."

But today, I want to focus on just one sound bite from the Gospel; one which marks a turning point. We all experience turning points in our lives on a daily basis. We don't always realise their significance at the time: that first chance encounter with someone who goes on to become a lifelong partner; the first awareness of a dull ache that leads to a life-changing diagnosis; the out of the blue redundancy notice that leads to the breakdown of a marriage, the loss of a home and a life suddenly spiralling out of control; the small, longed-for yet unexpected random act of

kindness that restores our faith in humankind or our sense of self-worth and sets us on the road to recovery.

It's very important to understand the context of today's Gospel reading. Firstly we should recognise that it comes from John's Gospel. Written later than the other three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. John was writing to inspire and encourage a fledgling, persecuted Christian community. Famously, his Gospel offers a highly developed, sophisticated interpretation of Jesus' identity. Whereas the other three Gospels offer first-hand accounts, John's has an extra dimension; it's mystical and overarching; there's a strong sense of hindsight bringing many more layers of connection and understanding. John shows the bigger picture. When I think of the Gospels in terms of film, I imagine the Synoptics are shot with traditional frames, the cameras secure on tracks or tripods, whereas John is a combination of wide angle images viewed from as far back as space interspersed with compelling close-ups shot with a series of hand held cameras. When I read the story of Jesus as told by John, I think of Salvador Dali's extraordinary painting of Christ on the cross looking down on the world below.

Today's passage comes from chapter 12 of John and in terms of the story, after Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, after Mary has anointed his feet and wiped them with her hair, after he has entered Jerusalem on a donkey (which we will hear and re-enact next week). So this is in the final days of Jesus' life on earth, and he knows it. Only a few lines after this passage Jesus hides himself from the people, so this is his last public appearance before his arrest and trial.

John is also distinctive in omitting some of the key events from the Synoptics and offering us alternative acts and happenings which deepen our understanding of the Jesus story. John doesn't mention the turning of the tables in the temple, it is the raising of Lazarus that in terms of the authorities' reaction, literally puts the final nail in Jesus' coffin in John. In John's version of

the Last Supper, there is no mention of the institution of what we know as the Eucharist, but instead, the sole account of the washing of the disciples' feet.

The seemingly simple request at the beginning of in today's Gospel signifies a huge turning point. In the first 11 chapters of John, there are many references to Jesus' hour. At the wedding at Cana in Galilee, he tells his mother "my hour has not yet come". Earlier in Jerusalem, in chapter 7, the religious leaders were astonished by Jesus' teaching, their attempts to arrest him failed "because his hour had not yet come" (7.30). Again in chapter 8, when Jesus was teaching "in the treasury in the temple . . . no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come."

It's Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. The city would have been packed, heaving with folk of all sorts who had gathered for the festival. Some Greeks come to the disciples with the simple request, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The disciples go straight to Jesus, whose startling response seems to have nothing to do with the question, but signifies the crucial moment when the satnav route is locked in: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Finally, the hour has come – it is here, it is time. But why now? And what have the Greeks got to do with it?

Well, the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus were not Jews but Gentiles, and so represent the world, all those for whom Jesus has come. In this sense to see is not just to look at, but to encounter, to understand. Suddenly, it seems, the whole world wants to listen to what Jesus has to say.

There is no garden of Gethsemane in John's Gospel, but rather here in this scene is what we may call the "Gethsemane moment" as Jesus admits, "Now my soul is troubled." But even here, the tone is very different from the Synoptics, and much more purposeful and determined. Jesus does not pray for the cup to pass, but is resolute in embracing what is to come. ". . . what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour." Similarly, later in John at Jesus' arrest when Peter strikes the slave with his sword, Jesus reprimands him. "Put your sword back in its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?"

But it's what happens next in our passage that gives a vital key to John's understanding of Jesus, particularly when considered in the light of the Synoptics. "Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' In the Synoptics, the voice of God speaks from heaven at Jesus' baptism and at the transfiguration. In John, there is no Transfiguration. John is more concerned to show how Jesus reflects and shares God's glory not just on one or two particular occasions but always. When the voice of God is heard in the Synoptics, it is not always clear whether it is heard by Jesus or by the crowds, or both. Here there is no such confusion or ambiguity. John makes it perfectly clear that all hear, and it is for the crowd's benefit, even if not everyone understands. Richard Burridge makes the interesting parallel that in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis, "the voice of Aslan, the great lion, seems only a terrifying roar to those who oppose him, but gentle words and strength to the children who love him."

As we will be reminded as we journey through Passiontide, the Greeks' request to see Jesus is not an easy one and we're not told whether or not they do get to see Jesus. Like James and his brother who enthusiastically confirm that they are willing to drink the cup that Christ will drink, there is a sense that they don't realise the magnitude of their request. For if we look at or on Christ, we must realise that Christ will look back at or on us, with that searching, all-knowing gaze, that x-ray vision. To see Christ is to be seen by Christ, and I urge you this coming week to spend time really thinking that through: to see Christ is to be seen by Christ.

Seeing and being seen, knowing and being fully known – these are often far beyond our comfort zone. Many of us, knowingly and unknowingly, don a series of masks every day. How many people do we let see the real us? Starting this week, we'll be hosting an exhibition of portraiture and sculpture created by people in the UK's criminal justice system, who are literally completely out of sight from the public, and largely out of sight from their families and friends for the majority of their sentence. I urge you to come along between Tuesday and April 9th to see their work, and to consider them in the light of this question of seeing and being seen. What are they revealing? What would they rather not

show? How much of their real selves is on display?

Some of our number here are – in a manner of speaking – exposing themselves - marking a turning point in their lives this Easter, when on Easter Eve in St Paul's Cathedral, they will be baptised and/or confirmed and/or received into the Church of England. There they will publically promise to turn to Christ and I hope as many as possible will come along to support them.

Back in our Gospel, Jesus is deeply troubled for he knows the agony that lies ahead. And yet still, he embraces it in a manner far beyond our ability to comprehend. For John, this is glory – the moment Christ is lifted up on the cross for love of humankind; the moment of kenosis, of self-emptying, when Christ gives of himself, gives everything, every last breath out of the unfathomable, limitless and unconditional love for all humankind, without exception. For John, this is how we see and know Jesus, this is how we come to understanding; this is how we see God. It is no wonder that such glory is dazzling and not easy to look upon. And yet, if we can find the courage, the strength, the trust to see – and be seen by - that glory, that limitless love, it can be a life-changing experience. It can give us to strength to face and endure some of the suffering which is an inevitable part of human living and loving. And so I close with a very short meditation from Gabriele Uhlein:

God

It is easier
to gaze into the sun
than into the face of the mystery of God.

Such is its beauty and radiance.

God says:

I am the supreme fire;
not deadly, but rather,
enkindling every spark of life.

Lindsay Meader