

Year B, Lent 5
March 29, 2009
Epiphany, Winchester
The Rev. Roger E. Nelson

“(some Greeks) come to Philip . . . and said to him,
‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’”

I am sure that many of you have been to Trinity Church, Copley Square in Boston either for a service or simply to tour the building. It is consistently rated as one of the most beautiful buildings in the country. Not many of you, though, have probably walked up into the pulpit. It dominates the church, because the man, who was rector at the time of its construction over 100 years ago, was one of the greatest preachers of his era, and perhaps in the history of Boston - Phillip Brooks. And it was at his order, that if you do go up into the pulpit, you will see carved into the wood, the words from today’s gospel: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

These words would be good motivation for any preacher.; to reveal through her preaching a glimpse of Jesus as he might be and act in our contemporary world. Bring Jesus into our very presence and let his words and actions ring true to the issues we face in our world.

These words of those Greeks, spoken to Philip so long ago, would also be a good motivator for you as you come to church on any particular Sunday morning. What better grace could you receive from your Sabbath worship then to catch a glimpse of Jesus: whether in sermon, or the sacrament, or in the body of assembled believers, or in the music, or in a moment of transcendence that comes to you direct from God. How full your heart would be if you could see Jesus here this morning.

The incident portrayed in today’s gospel occurred when Jesus and his friends were in Jerusalem to observe the Passover festival, the central yearly community act of worship of the Jewish people. That is why those Greeks were there, as well as people from all of Judea and Galilee and indeed the known Mediterranean world. This was also to be Jesus’ last Passover, his last trip to Jerusalem, the final days of his life. Thus the response of Jesus to the news that some Greeks were seeking to meet him was to prepare the crowds for what was about to happen.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.
Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat fall into
the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies,
it bears much fruit. . . . And what should I say –
‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason
that I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.”

Next Sunday, the eight days of Holy Week begin for western Christians: the eight days which recall the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the Last Supper with his friends, the arrest, trial and crucifixion, and the resurrection. We, as a community of believers, will act out in our liturgies of this octave of days those final events of Jesus' earthly life. Now, if you want to see Jesus, the real essential Jesus, then I would urge you to come to church not only on Palm Sunday and Easter, but also on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday at 7:30 pm and Saturday at 6:00 pm. For the complete answer to who Jesus is can only be found by participating in the whole week with Jesus – the agony as well as the joy, the doubt as well as the assurance, the defeat as well as the victory. You will come to the end of the week with a fuller understanding of who Jesus is, a deeper faith in his saving love, and a renewed sense of Christ who abides in you.

For one thing you will discover a Jesus who truly questions and doubts the will of his Father: "take this cup from me"; "Father, why have you forsaken me?"; a Jesus who struggles against his father's will before he consents to it. You will discover a truly human Jesus, one as conflicted as we often are over God's will for our lives. You will find a Jesus that is fully human, whom you can reach out to and embrace. Whatever distance there may be between yourself and Jesus will disappear, as you recognize and acknowledge the fullness of his humanity and not just his divinity. If you want to see Jesus, you have to accept and understand his humanity.

You will discover during Holy Week a Jesus who is one with his disciples and friends. So often our images and pictures of Jesus show him alone; but his true identity is to be found when he is in the midst of others. The Last Supper epitomizes this truth, when through the sacrament of his body and blood he comes to dwell in us, just as we dwell in him, and he dwells in his Father. Jesus was no lonely prophet or ascetic, he was a man who found joy and fulfillments in the company of others.

Holy Week also allows us to see a man who faithfully took up whatever cross came his way, no matter what the cost. The agony that was his on Good Friday was real: the crown of thorns pierced the skin of his head, the whip caused open wounds upon his back, and the weight of the cross forced him to fall twice. This was a man of extraordinary physical strength and endurance, rooted in spiritual strength that could and would not be overcome.

We see in the liturgies of Holy Week a vision of Jesus as "the man for others" of whom the German martyr and saint Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. Jesus is seen to be one who came among us not to be served, but to serve: a healer, a source of strength and comfort, an agent of forgiveness and reconciliation, the lamb offered up for the sins of the world, the one lifted up as today's gospel states, that all people may be drawn to him.

Finally, Holy Week and its many services lead us to see Jesus as the triumphant and victorious Lord. The victory over death, life's mortal enemy is discovered in the empty tomb and the bodily resurrection of our Lord. What seemed like defeat becomes the ultimate victory. The powers of evil have done their worst and have not prevailed. And the the choirs sing:

“Let the whole wide earth rejoice:
Death is conquered, we are free,
Christ has won the victory”

And these are only some of the themes that you will discover when you join the church's observance of Holy Week in its wholeness. I would urge you to be a part of our parish community as we bring to life the liturgies of Holy Week. Clear your calendars and join with us in the great Pascal Feast; not just Palm Sunday and Easter Day, but also Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The spiritual growth and insight you will gain will lift your spirit and fill your heart as the final journey of Jesus becomes your journey also.

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race and all creation you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection: through Jesus Christ our Lord.