

The Gospel of John is challenging; it is full of symbols and theological insight. The text is rich with imagery, and often beautiful to listen to. But this writing sometimes becomes a burden as we try to understand what is going on in the story of Jesus as John records it.

Today's passage from John 12 comes immediately after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a Donkey – a story we will hear next week. Within this passage we hear of Greeks seeking Jesus and a monologue of types where Jesus speaks about his death in very human terms.

The lectionary places this passage before us as we begin Passiontide, the final two weeks of our Lenten journey, as a call to discipleship which challenges us not to forget who Jesus is! All of our readings today point us to a Jesus who is the promise of a new future (in Jeremiah 31) and the great high priest (in Hebrews 5). The nature of who Jesus is, and the meaning of his earthly pilgrimage all come into play as we journey to Jerusalem and see what is to take place.

In John's narrative, after the loud and public procession through the streets into Jerusalem, in which the excited crowd makes it clear that Jesus is the Messiah and the one who has come to liberate them from their oppressors, we can only assume that the city was buzzing. It was Passover, and the city was already full of those coming to the temple; and others who would have come to also witness these events. It is unclear why John singles out the Greeks, as many must have been wanting to see Jesus at this time, but it is likely John is trying to point out that Jesus, the word, has reached far and wide and nothing is beyond the breadth of the kingdom of God.

The other consideration to wonder about is that unlike many in the crowd, including those leaders who feared Jesus was causing insurrection, the Greeks will not be coming to an ideology or political campaign – they were drawn to an experience, a relationship, an understanding that draws on all senses and faculties. They did not know what the consequences of Jesus' words to them would become – but they knew that something was happening that would change them and the world – and they wanted to find out more.

The Jesus the Greeks meet prepares Jesus' followers for the journey in the coming days. A journey that will mean walking with Jesus to the Golgotha and watching him die. It is a journey that seems to have no hope, and then when all seems to be lost – they will find an empty tomb – and they will see Jesus raised from the dead.

But let us not jump ahead too quickly, this is a danger of the story of Jesus, we jump to the end rather than focus on what we might learn from the passage before us. The discourse which Jesus presents to the crowd, his

last public speech is at one level is a clear indication of what God is doing in that moment; but it also addresses some very human questions.

“What should I say – “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” (v. 27). Jesus rejects fear at losing his mortal, physical life because he knows that God is with him, that, indeed, God sent him for this purpose, to reveal God’s abundant life, something more than the usual symbols of life – wealth, youth, power – that the world offers¹.

It would appear that in these questions and answers Jesus invites us to consider with care what we have come to accept, as “the way of the world,” what we have come to define as desirable.

The last year has redefined in many ways what we think is acceptable. On Tuesday we will mark with a day of reflection 12 months since the date of the first lock down. Our ideas of what is ‘normal’ and what is acceptable has changed a lot – some for the better some of the worse.

A higher percentage of people from some ethnic backgrounds, and some social groups have died in this pandemic because we have come to accept, often without even meaning to, or thinking much about it, that it is OK to treat some parts of our community differently to others. We have forgotten to ask questions about equality and what the consequences of decisions which are good for us personally, might have on our neighbours or friends, let alone on those we have never met.

Violence against those who have less power continues because while ever we are safe, it does not occur often to think that others are not. Or worse, what if asking the hard questions means we are no longer safe?

Jesus says to the crowd, yes maybe I could change this outcome, but that would only change things for me, not for others. There is a bigger purpose here, and bigger outcome greater than my individual pain. Now let’s be careful here, this is not to say that God causes the pain in our lives, or that we have to endure it; but rather there are times when there are bigger questions that need to be asked and answered. Also, in the way John writes he is always attempting to help the reader see that God is at work in all creation even when things seem helpless.

As one of my favourite theologians, David Lose points out – we need to be careful in reading John that we do not lose sight of the message, as John tries to link everything together. At the end of the day, amidst all that is written the message is constant - *God is here. God is at work. God is not afraid of those parts of our lives that frighten us. God does not value us as the world does. God will not give up. God is on the side of life and love. And the*

¹ <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/lent-5-b-the-great-inversion/>

*love, mercy, and life God offers is stronger than the hate, judgment, and death that too often colours the world.*²³

This is an important message for us to remember. Many things need to change in the world, many unconscious behaviours need to be challenged, many things which we may think are normal, need to stop. As we reflected in our Lent Study on Monday, we may need to let go of what we know or do or control to find God who is within and around us.

But amidst all the change, amidst the challenge to see something beyond ourselves we are reminded that God is constant. That God calls us to not only ask the hard questions, but also have the courage to love ourselves and others in the light of those questions.

The tone of our Lenten journey changes a little as we enter Passiontide, the music seems to get more sombre and the readings more challenging because it invites us to hear what Jesus said to the crowd. *‘Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.’*

This is the invitation to us all as we approach Holy Week and Easter, as we prepare for returning to physical church; that we let go of what we think we know, and be open to following where God leads. And to remember that however much this might scare us; God is with us, and that God’s mercy, love and life will never leave us. Amen.

But let’s not be in too much of a hurry to reach Easter Sunday – rather let us take these days of passiontide to pray, to hear the bible, to share in the Eucharist together and to have courage that we are the people who have come to see Jesus – and I hope will help others see the light of Jesus too! Amen.

² <https://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/lent-5-b-the-great-inversion/>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-1220-33-5>