

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 10, 2022

Text: John 12:20-43

“Glory Be to Jesus “

Every time I think of you, I don't understand,
why you let the things you do get so out of hand.
You'd have managed better if you had it planned.
Why'd you choose such a backwards time,
and such a strange land.

Don't you get me wrong...
I only wanna know...

Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you?
What have you sacrificed?
Jesus Christ Superstar,
Do you think you're who they say you are?

Tim Rice, 1970.

So sings the spirit of Judas and a glitzy choir of gospel angels near the end of Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Its story of Jesus' ministry and death follows the false narrative of Jesus told by scholars who rejected the New Testament gospels as trustworthy historical testimonies. It imagines Jesus as a popular figure who, like one of the 60's many superstars, rose to quick fame only to flame out in a tragic death. It gets Jesus wrong, just like the front cover magazine articles that feature Him prior to Christmas and Easter each

year. This can infuriate us as His followers, but in the light of today's gospel reading, we see a better response to all those Jesus stories that miss the mark.

As Jesus and His disciples mixed with the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for Passover, there was an extra buzz in the air. The spotlight shone on Jesus. The news that He had raised his friend, Lazarus, from the dead was on the lips of everyone. Many had gathered at the city gate to see Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey colt, enacting the prophetic words of Zechariah, and they sang His praise in hope that He would soon draw a sword to deliver Israel. The religious leadership kept a nervous eye on Jesus too. They viewed Him as a serious threat to the stability of the nation, and they searched for a way of stopping Him before their Roman overlords stepped in themselves to crush the rebellion they feared with such force that the whole nation would suffer.

We are told that some Greeks were among those fascinated with Jesus. It is a little hard to tell who they were, but the fact that they had come to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover suggests that they were Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel, commonly known as God-fearers. They somehow met Philip, and they asked if he could arrange for them to meet Jesus. Philip and Andrew brought their request to Jesus.

But Jesus had something else on His mind at that moment. *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* On the surface, this might have sounded like Jesus approving of the request. Among His disciples, Jesus had often referred to Himself with the messianic title, the Son of Man. Did He see a meeting with these Gentile believers as an opportunity for reaching out to a wider audience?

No, the glory of which Jesus spoke could not be given to Him by a devoted group of Greeks. The only praise Jesus sought was that which God the Father gives. Jesus knew that He must be glorified as the Christ in the last place any person would ever think to look - on a desolate Roman cross. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* Unlike everyone else, Jesus knew why He lived. He lived to die on behalf of those whom sin kills. Jesus was God’s Servant fulfilling His mission to save us from our sin. Only He understood this.

In the wilderness, the devil seemed to think that Jesus had come to set Himself up as king of the world, so he tried to deceive Him into looking to him for that prize. But Jesus sought no earthly kingdom. Throughout His ministry, people who followed Jesus had big plans for Him. A crowd He fed in a deserted region wanted to make Him their Bread King, so that they would never have to work or worry about another meal. The twelve men who knew Jesus best, His called disciples, barely knew Him at all. They didn’t want Jesus to die. They wanted Him to be their ticket to freedom from Rome’s tyranny. And they jockeyed for position with each other for the best seat of power in His new kingdom.

Even today, we struggle to make Jesus fit into the part of our lives that we choose. The biblical scholars who cast doubt upon the words and works of Jesus do so because they believe that He is nothing more than a good religious leader, like Moses, Mohammed or Buddha. They believe that all religions are of human origin and therefore equally valid. So they labor to rebrand Jesus to fit that mold. Except they repent of their rebellious heresies, they will be ashamed on the Last Day when they meet the Glorious Lord as their Judge.

Though we are Christ's followers, we too fall into temptations to profane the name of our Lord with our sin. Our gospel reading drops the bombshell that there were some among Israel's religious leaders who did believe that Jesus is the Christ. However, their faith in Him was not strong enough to enable them to make a public confession that Jesus is Lord. They were afraid of the inevitable rebuke they would receive from their Pharisees brothers who hated Jesus. So they kept their faith secret.

How often do we imitate them when mixing with friends, neighbours or family members who do not share our faith in Jesus? What will they think of us or say to others behind our backs if we give witness to Jesus' works and words? Have we not valued the comfort and pleasure of our families more than God's honour and our need for His grace when we have decided to not come to worship in order to open Christmas presents or go on an Easter egg hunt? Jesus is Lord, true God and true man. He rightly deserves our complete trust and willing service above all others, but we so naturally put ourselves before Him. We must heed His warning: *"Whoever loves his life loses it."*

And we ought to rely upon His promise even more: *"whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him."* Jesus bids us to follow Him in a life of rejecting the endless temptations to put ourselves first that each day presents us, so that we can throw ourselves into believing that Jesus is our entire and eternal life and living it with Him and our neighbours in love.

Rather than coveting the honor of the Greeks who sought Him, Jesus lived for the glory of God the Father that would be displayed when He offered His life, like a grain of wheat cast into the ground, to be sacrificed on a cross outside of Jerusalem. God's glory shines brightly from the cross of Jesus because it so fully demonstrates the height, depth, length and width of God's love for sinners like us. Because Jesus died, God spares us death and hell. Because Jesus lives and reigns forever, we have His life to live as God's baptized, forgiven children, set free to follow Jesus in the way of service to others that is faithful, forgiving, and sacrificial.

We don't get Jesus because we keep expecting Him to love the praise that comes from people. But He gets us, thanks be to Him. Jesus knows the depths of our sin, our bondage and our blindness. He carried them all to the cross for us to free us. Like a grain of wheat planted in the soil, our Crucified Lord rose up to bear the full fruit of salvation that, enlivens and illumines us, so that we count the praise of people and our own pleasure as rubbish compared to the glory of serving our Loving Lord who has promised: "*If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.*" Hosanna in the highest! Amen.