



Fifth Sunday of Lent
Sunday 25 March 2012

Seeing Jesus, Letting Go

A sermon by Revd Rosy Fairhurst

Readings: Jeremiah 31.31-34; John 12.20-33

Have you heard the one about the Greeks who came to Philip, a disciple with a Greek name, saying they wanted to see Jesus. He said, hang on a minute, I'll go and ask Andrew – and went and told another disciple with a Greek name. He said, We'd better go and ask Jesus. Then the two of them went to tell Jesus and were so rapt with what he said that they completely forget about the Greeks.

Is this John's guide to how not to be an evangelist? A major theme of John is how we 'see' Jesus. What has this episode got to tell us about how that works?

What if, instead of leaving the Greeks on hold, as it were – and we all know how frustrating that is – Philip had said, Come with me, let's go and see Jesus together? Just listening in on the conversation between Jesus, Philip and Andrew, the Greeks would have discovered just how important it was to Jesus that they had arrived. It was the trigger for Jesus to say, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' They would have heard this extraordinary wisdom teacher at his most profound about losing their lives to save them. They might have found it enigmatic, but they would have 'seen' Jesus in the sense of encountering and knowing Jesus personally that John is so keen to communicate. They would have been able to join in the learning community of disciples – and discover that you don't have to have all the answers to be a disciple – in fact that's a disqualification.

I see something of us in Philip and Andrew. I don't suppose they were hung up on the word evangelism as we often are – associating it with holding people at Passport Control, making them stand behind the yellow line until we've seen that their credentials are all in order and they have the right answers. Not something we as an aspirationally open and inclusive church want to be identified with. No, we're more interested in 'enabling people to question and discover for themselves the significance of Christ.' But can we do that if, like Philip and Andrew, we go off to see Jesus on our own first – and then get so wrapped up in our own encounter with Jesus that we forget to get back to them. Isn't that effectively leaving them at passport control too?

What on earth is it that stops us from bringing people along with us to see Jesus – Of course it begs the question where do we go to see Jesus. Wouldn't that be the body of Christ – our community here at St Martin's, at the eucharist, the passion play in Trafalgar Square - wherever we think they might see Jesus too.

Who are the equivalent of Greeks in our lives? These Greeks were probably diaspora Greek Jews rather than Gentiles. They weren't *that* different. In fact they felt a connection with Andrew and Philip through their Greek names which drew them to them. When does this episode happen? After the raising of Lazarus. The crowd that had witnessed these events spread the word – and those who have heard about it who want to come and see for themselves. It's prompted the Pharisees to say, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.' They might as well have said, 'How vulgar, mass revival – and what's the theology?'

Would *we* ever be more interested in sitting around within the temple courts deconstructing the miracle – asking what really happened there – than coming to see for ourselves, or encouraging

others to come and see for themselves. John's a questioner – he wants to know the truth, but he's at pains to tell us that the way we know the truth is by *seeing*, encountering Jesus – personal knowing – and that we can choose whether we're those who invite others saying 'Come and See' or whether we make a barrier to that by making a belief of our doubts within our religious club rather than bringing our questions with others to Jesus.

So, what happens when Philip and Andrew do go to see Jesus. What does Jesus say to them?– it would be too bad if I just did what I've been warning against, and keep us from the encounter with Jesus. He says a lot, but the bit I want to focus on is this:

'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. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

As Jesus draws closer to his passion, he gets clearer and clearer about his impending death, and clearer and clearer that it is the only way for him to bring real life. He understands that this will set out a shape of living for those who follow him. 'Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'

The shape of living which Jesus gives us is one of letting go of those things we cling to ensure our independent survival – to die to our autonomous existence and to live in God and through God connected to others. And part of us always resists it, fearing that our darkness and vulnerability will be exposed. Think of how in John's gospel he challenged the rich young ruler about letting go of the power and wealth he clung to for security, or the man by the pool of Bethesda, 'Do you want to be well' about letting go of the familiarity of his identity in the terms of his sickness. Or the Samaritan woman about the relationships which led her to dispose of husbands rather than work things through. All of us, as we have dwelt upon this Lent, have developed strategies, defences and armour to protect ourselves from our vulnerabilities.

The difference between the way of Christ and the way so often institutionalized in religion, is stark. If we continue to export the badness and blame other people for the bits which are in the darkness of our own hearts too, we might feel as though we are living some kind of holy perfection, but this is not the kind of sacred space Jesus calls us to. Jesus knows it's time for him to be 'lifted up' on the cross because people are beginning to be attracted to his teaching and living in such an undefended, de-centred way. As he prepares to be lifted up on the cross, he calls us to follow and to be prepared to see him unflinchingly as he draws the venom and denial, the fear and hatred of the world which this freedom provokes. And as we do, to come to a sacred space of letting go, letting go of whatever that seeing exposes which we recognize in ourselves.

Letting go instead of hoarding our life for independent survival. Letting go of our defences so that we can allow a deep reconnection with God. Looking at what harms us to heal us. Letting go so that our vulnerabilities can be what lead us to our true calling in dependence on God and reconnected with others

As we enter Passiontide, Jesus calls us to walk with him to the sacred space of the cross, the place of letting go. Trusting that this is the place where God will make the transformation of our exposed need into our gift and calling. To walk this way is to tread on holy ground. And it feels like loss.

What is it that we might need to let go of this Passiontide? Where are we clinging on to something that in our heart of hearts we know doesn't bring us life? What is the Titanic in our life, the one unsinkable thing we've put our trust in? The area we've tried to control? The relationship we've tried to make something it isn't? The fear that prevents us from stepping out? The resentment we

hold on to so tightly? Now is a holy time for letting go. And here's a question, which the poor Greeks left wondering pose for us. Are we going to make this journey as isolated individuals, or will we let go of our individualism and need to have it all sorted first to invite others, both inside the church and outside, to make with us, so that we can see Jesus together?