



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Exercising the eyes of faith

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

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John 12:20-33

20 Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. **21** They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." **22** Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. **23** Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24** Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. **25** Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26** Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. **27** "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. **28** Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." **29** The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. **30** Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. **31** Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. **32** And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." **33** He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

As we continue our journey through Lent, we become increasingly aware that this is a journey to the cross. As we arrive at John 12, we discover Gentiles, described in the gospel as "some Greeks", come to Philip asking if they might see Jesus. Perhaps they were investigating the possibility of following.

Crowds had previously flocked to Jesus (4:1; 6:2 and 6:24) and they had also heard and interacted with him (7:20). Now we have a delegation of Greeks and they choose to come by the honoured way of introduction.

The position in John is immediately following 'the triumphal entry'. In the light of that, we can underscore the importance of this encounter of Jesus with the Greeks as an insight into the nature of God's kingdom in Christ through the eyes of faith, set dramatically at Passover.

There is no question that a section that begins here and runs for six chapters is correctly described by Bruce Milne as "one of the profoundest and most demanding sections of the whole gospel".

So who are these Greek seekers? New Testament scholar, F F Bruce, said, "These Greeks may have come from any part of the Greek-speaking world, possibly from a Greek city in Palestine itself."

John's readers will have in mind the speculation of opponents of Jesus, who said he might go to teach the Greeks (7:35). Throughout the New Testament, the word 'Greek' is used of Greek-speaking Gentiles and could well be similar to those we will meet later at Cornelius' house in Acts 10.

They were a particular group who embraced the Jewish way of life, even to the point of synagogue worship. But, at the same time, they may not have actually fully embraced Judaism and become proselytes ... and they may have been on a scouting mission in the city.

Just a couple of Sundays ago, we looked at John 2 where Jesus overturned the tables and the relevance of 'The Court of the Gentiles' came to the fore. Jews were forbidden to enter this area and death was the punishment for any that did. Such strong words are still found on the pathway that leads from the Western Wall in Jerusalem to the Islamic mosque above. In such a context, we can understand some of the tensions that surround the Temple Mount even today.

The curiosity of these Greeks is worthy of consideration. They didn't just want to admire Jesus, or merely have sight of him, even if the text tends to indicate that. They really wanted to meet him.

This passage offers rich possibilities for preaching or study, but our focus must remain on the crucifixion of Jesus and its implications for the Christian community.

John's Gospel has an expansive and dramatic understanding of the work of the cross of Jesus Christ. Far too often Christians want to reduce the meaning of scripture to a personal and individual application alone. But John always portrays a love that is extended to the whole world, which is estranged by choice from God and in need of the redemptive work of Christ.

This passage opens the way to understanding the centrality of the cross, even before we reach what we describe as the passion narrative.

Philip turns to Andrew with their request. It was of course Andrew who had introduced Simon Peter to Jesus. Philip and Andrew, in turn, together approach Jesus. The response of Jesus Christ, in John, establishes a clear link between his sufferings and his glorification.

Each of the other three gospels, which we know as the Synoptics, point to the resurrection as the time of glorification. For me, John is most helpful in that he sees both the cross and the resurrection in the same camera frame. It is the cross that will lift up Jesus Christ in all his glory and power.

Jesus' whole ministry drew crowds to him – and so the request of the Greeks was neither surprising nor unusual. It is also important to acknowledge that Jesus never chose to be inaccessible to people:

- Consider the call of the first disciples as they were going about their work ... he sought them
- Notice the way that the outcasts were able to call out to him and even touch him ... he had a place in his heart for them
- Children came to him and, although the disciples tried to turn them away, he would have none of it and his welcome of children becomes characteristic of his generous welcome to all
- His momentous journey to the cross did not happen in a private place and what had taken place in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a practical demonstration of this.

Let us look carefully at what happens as these Greeks make their way to see Jesus – and all made possible through the agency of the disciples.

Text: John 12:21-22

“They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’ Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.”

A strong reason for paying attention to this passage in the season of Lent is not so much to consider the Greeks, but the importance of what this moment ushers in. It helps us gain an understanding of the impending suffering and death of Jesus upon the cross. The appearance of the Greeks marks a crucial moment in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is possible that the disciples needed to move around Jerusalem incognito because of what had taken place as Jesus entered the city, but also because they were accompanied by thousands of others who had come to the city for Passover.

Philip and Andrew are the only disciples to have Greek names and we are told where Philip came from ‘Bethsaida in Galilee’ – an ethnically diverse region. Perhaps Philip spoke Greek - but our focus is upon the One these visitors were seeking.

THE MOTIVATION WHICH BROUGHT THEM TO JESUS

John’s Gospel has a particular interest in the variety of groups that existed:

- There are the Jews in general
- There are the Pharisees in particular
- There is great interest in the band of disciples

This is the only time the Greeks appear. They could symbolically represent all the peoples of the world and their enquiry ‘to see Jesus’ may represent the desire that all must come to on their way to discovering him.

- It took a first bold step to meet him

It is one thing to want to see Jesus and it is quite another to make that vital step of enquiry. As many of us know, it often takes loving friends and people who know him to introduce others. There is no unhealthy insistence in this enquiry, but a polite and genuine desire to see Jesus.

Seeking is important. Blaise Pascal offered an interesting thought in this area, “There are three kinds of people in the world: those who have sought God and found him and now serve him, those who are seeking him but have not found him, and those who neither seek him nor find him. The first are reasonable and happy, the second reasonable and unhappy, and the third unreasonable and unhappy.”

This is a broad sweep conclusion, but it does help us to see the importance of the search.

- They declared their sense of interest

Many people have suggested that the Greek people were amongst the most intelligent of races and the first of the ancient peoples to wander the world in search of truth. These particular Greeks had obviously heard of Jesus; perhaps they had even listened to him teach, or one of the signs may have happened in their presence.

The obvious curiosity is to be noted. Jesus is no longer on the road, but in the temple precincts and their curiosity would be even more alive as everyone was talking about him.

This may be the same area where religious teachers had listened to the young Jesus, about 20 years earlier.

Martin Luther King talked about our lives needing to be joined to a greater purpose:

No man has learned to live
until he can rise above the narrow confines
of his indisputable concerns
to the broader concerns of all humanity.
Length without breadth
is like a self-contained tributary
having no outward flow to the ocean.
Stagnant, still, and stale,
it lacks both life and freshness.
In order to live creatively
and meaningfully
our self-concern must be wedded to other concerns.

THE FACILITATION OF THE DISCIPLES MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR THEM TO MEET JESUS CHRIST

Philip and Andrew took the Greeks' enquiry to Jesus. It is interesting that in the appointment of the Twelve, Andrew is named second without explanation. It is also Andrew, who at the feeding of the five thousand, noticed and brought to Jesus the lad with the loaves and fishes. He had complete confidence that Jesus knew what to do with them. Was it these qualities that gave encouragement to the Greeks to ask for an introduction to Jesus?

The majority of people need to find someone who is willing to introduce them to Jesus Christ. Only a very small number undertake that journey on their own.

- They were attracted to Jesus

If Philip was an evangelist, he had all the qualities that would reach out to others – and in doing so he would build the bridges to enable the possibility of a conversation. He would be looking for the opportunity to point people to Jesus Christ.

It was William Barclay who described a Greek person as “characteristically a seeker after truth”.

This was a critical moment in the expansion of the gospel, which will eventually be taken throughout the whole world.

- The disciples make the necessary introduction

The disciples had been with Jesus long enough to know that though, on occasions, they considered people to be a nuisance, he never did. We remind ourselves:

- He stopped to share a meal with a tax collector
- He had time for a woman who had been ill for years, even though he was on an urgent journey and had the crowd pressing upon him
- He found time for a Pharisee who came at night
- He would reach out to lepers, who would invariably be ignored by teachers

Jesus was the One who found time for others, even if the demands upon his own time were enormous. This has become the pattern of the best of missional service.

THE WILLINGNESS OF JESUS CHRIST TO MEET THE GREEKS

Earlier in Lent, we explored the nature of discipleship and it is of great interest that we return to that theme. The Greeks don't appear to be addressed directly by Jesus, but John's version of discipleship seems to have an application for them as well as the disciples.

"Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies ..." (12:24-25)

This illustration of wheat that falls to the ground speaks of how life comes from death. It was as the seed was thrown into the cold earth, and buried as if in a tomb, that it bore fruit.

We also find in this context what has been described by some as 'the Johanne Gethsemane'. We read the troubling and challenging words of Jesus, *"Now is my heart troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'"* (John 12:27a)

□ The hour now approached!

When Philip and Andrew came to Jesus, the Lord announced, *"The hour has now come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* (v.23) There is a real sense of destiny here. The hour had come for him to give himself entirely to what will be the supreme act of love upon the cross.

As we examine the gospels and the different aspects of the ministry of Jesus, we find there are clearly times when Jesus drew back from unnecessary conflict, very often because he understood that his time had not yet come. But now the atmosphere has changed. The way of grief and sorrow emerges and it is this that will lead to glory and victory (v.v. 27 and 28).

There will be no turning back from the decisions made as they relate to God's eternal purposes in Christ. Jesus has come to this place in obedience to the will of God. In this hour of struggle, he is living in the heat of the battle. There can be no turning back now.

□ In this context we are given insight into the saving purpose of the cross

There can be no authentic Christian message without the word of the cross. It is our strong message to the world. But it would be hard for people to understand it.

- It will be described as a stumbling block and foolishness to both Jew and Greek (1 Cor.1:23)
- It was unthinkable for the disciples to imagine his death
- It was inevitable because of what he said and did

Our text begins with a request to see Jesus. Later in the same passage, Jesus speaks about everyone being able to see him in the cross (v.32). This cross is the inevitable end of his loving life and is the fullest picture of God's love.

Despite the fact that Jesus struggles and agonises at what lies ahead of him, he willingly embraces God's purposes and a voice from heaven confirms his decision (v.28). Not everyone heard the voice, but he did.

When all of life seems to crush in on us, we need to return to the cross and gain inspiration, hope and purpose – and discover that the Man of Calvary speaks to all people in every generation.

Do you and I need to see Jesus? The power of his love still has an amazing attraction. Martin Luther once contended, "If you want to understand the Christian message, you must start with the wounds of Jesus Christ."

The lifting up of Jesus upon the cross will be the way that Greeks – and all people – will see him.