

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 5th Sunday of Lent – 17th March 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

One of the striking things about the book we have been studying in our Lent groups this year, Bishop Tom Wright's *Lent and Easter for Everyone*, is how it charts the gradually tightening noose around Jesus as he travels through Galilee and Judea, incurring the jealousy and fear, and finally the anger, of the religious and political authorities. Last week we saw how the Pharisees, guardians of the religious law, were propelled into an unlikely alliance with the henchmen of Herod Antipas, the puppet ruler of Galilee appointed by imperial Rome – people to whom the Pharisees would not normally have given the time of day. They all felt threatened by Jesus.

The raising of Lazarus in the previous chapter of John's Gospel increased Jesus's fame and following, with the result that the religious leaders were now actively plotting to put him to death. Just before our Gospel reading begins, the Pharisees say to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!' (John 12.19) It's at this point that we are told some 'Greeks' wished to see Jesus. They may have been Greeks who had converted to Judaism, in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Or it may just have been a generic word for 'gentile'. Either way, their request marks a turning point in John's Gospel.

People sometimes divide this Gospel into two: the Book of Signs, in which Jesus performs seven 'signs' or miracles, and the Book of Glory, charting the way to the Cross. The conversation about 'the Greeks' marks the beginning of the second.

The Greeks' request –in the King James translation of the Bible, 'Sir, we would see Jesus' – was often carved around the inside of pulpits. A reminder to clergy that the point of their preaching was to make Jesus present, conveying to people something of his passion and compassion, his unconditional welcome to those on the margins, the generous and open-hearted way he lived, the way he faced outward, always meeting the needs of others, his challenge to small-minded religiosity, his healing presence and the miraculous effect he had on situations, the deep connection he felt with the one he trusted as his heavenly Father, the strength and intensity of his praying, his radical message of love and willingness to risk all for it, his courage in embracing suffering and death on the cross, somehow so absorbing and transforming the evil that had put him there that death itself could not contain him, so that the story ends not in defeat and tragedy but in unexpected joy, abundant new life with God, now and for ever. 'Sir, we would see Jesus.'

The moment of the Greeks' request is an appropriate reading for Passion Sunday, this day on which our focus turns from the wilderness journey of Lent to the events of Holy Week in Jerusalem. The conversation about the Greeks' request comes the day after Jesus's triumphal entry into the city. Yet how quickly the mood is turning. Jesus realises that, as the Pharisees have noted, 'the world has gone after him'. The words Jesus now uses are: 'the hour has come'. Throughout John's Gospel the phrase has been used as a negative: at

the wedding of Cana, when his mother urges him to perform the first of his 'signs', he says 'my hour has not yet come'. The first attempt by the religious leaders to arrest him in Jerusalem failed because 'his hour had not yet come'. But now it has.

The point for us, as for 'the Greeks', is this: if we really ask to 'see Jesus', the thing we will be shown, the thing that defines him more than anything else, is the power of sacrificial love. His 'glory' (a word which also means revelation) will turn out to be the cross. The image Jesus uses at this point is an agricultural one, as so often in his teaching in rural Galilee. Earlier he had offered them the image of the sower sowing seed. Now, as he faces death, he reflects on a seed dying in order to generate new life. It is only if the grain dies and is planted that it yields 'much fruit'.

One ear of wheat might contain forty seeds. If each grain is sown individually, the following year they may produce sixteen hundred seeds, in the year after that sixty-four thousand, and in the year after that over two and a half million. But none of that would be possible without the first one. There is a sense of violence within the image, too - it is only if you crush an ear of wheat that its individual seeds fall to the ground.

There are many examples of those who have – voluntarily or not – borne fruit through their deaths. It happens in wartime especially. The Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe, offering to be executed at Auschwitz in place of a prisoner who had a wife and children. But it also happens in peace time. The gendarme Arnaud Beltrame, who had recently been baptised, offering to take the place of a woman held hostage in a supermarket in Carcassonne in 2018.

Most of us will not find our faith tested like Kolbe and Beltrame. But in smaller ways it will be. Our faith sometimes asks of us, 'what are you prepared to give up for this?' Over the next two weeks we will reflect again on the '*kenosis*' of Jesus which St Paul wrote about, the self-emptying even to the point of death on the cross.

Our engagement with the Passion story is not just historical. It's about noting and responding to suffering everywhere. It's about Gaza, Ukraine, the streets of Marseille, the people I don't know and the people I do. What can I do to help that I am not doing? How does this outrage that happened two thousand years ago affect my responses now? There's something about the Cross that propels Christians to action still, two thousand years on.

I once met a man who as a youth had been in a concentration camp, where there was a perimeter fence facing onto farmland. One day he was standing near the fence, malnourished, shivering in the cold. A man working in the fields walked towards him and threw across the fence a potato that he had just dug. The prisoner caught it and looked at him in gratitude. The potato thrower signed himself with the cross. Later in life the prisoner became a priest. He attributed it to that moment. A seed, bearing fruit.

Amen.