

The Face of Christ ...

... in Beverley Minster; in ourselves

A sermon given on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 17th March 2024 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster

John 12:20-33

A friend of mine is a former dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London and I was at his installation; my goodness, what a show that was; the great and the good of the City of London; some of the most powerful men and women in the country turned out in all their finery; there were uniforms and medals; there were robes, #; there were chains of office; there was even a man with a tall fur hat carrying a jewel sword, rather like Penny Morden did at the coronation last year; and of course, the Lord Mayor himself in all his finery. How on earth do you preach to a congregation like that? Given especially that a great number of them would only have been there because it was a sense of duty rather than any religious compulsion. Well, he made it very, very simple and he summed it up in one sentence. He said, "I want people to look at St Paul's Cathedral and see the face of Christ. Not a bad vision for any church - "I want people to look at the Minster and see the face of Christ."

And I was reminded of that moment with this passage from John's gospel which begins with this request from some Greeks who have come to the festival to see Jesus. Now, my commentary says that these may have been Greek Jews or they may just have been Greeks who came out of curiosity and reverence for the Jewish faith - there were quite a few like that at that time. And they want to see Jesus. And it comes immediately after Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. And it's as if the two events make Jesus realise that the time has now come for the culmination of his life and ministry.

As you know, we have four gospels and they are quite different to each other sometimes and John is the most different of them. And so certain things that appear in the other gospels don't appear in John: there is no revelation to Peter, James and John on the mount of Transfiguration; there is no agony in the garden. But there is this incident which is not in the other gospels - Jesus realising that his time has come. And those words are significant because at earlier points in the gospel we are told that his time had NOT come: so when his mother comes to him at Cana and says they've run out of wine, he says, "*Mother, what's that to do with me? My time has not yet come.*"

Just three or four chapters back in John's gospel, from this morning's reading, we hear of them attempting to arrest Jesus, but he slips away, for his time had not yet come. But now it's as if he realises that it has. And maybe there was something about Greeks coming to him, which was the final sort of indicator, the indicator that a purely earthly ministry was no longer enough, that like the seed, he had to go into the ground, as it were, to produce great fruit. It could no longer be just those that he could reach physically, but those through his

spirit that he would reach wherever he was in the world and in creation after his death and resurrection.

And we also have a hint of the theme that comes up in the other gospels: in the Gethsemane story, we are told that Jesus is troubled - well, he would be, wouldn't he? Knowing that the climax was approaching; knowing that he now had to face the opposition which he knew existed to his ministry; and he knew that the battle between himself and the world was coming to a climax. And so in the next two weeks from this Sunday, which is often known as Passion Sunday, we follow Christ closely through the last days and hours of his earthly life, to the tomb and then eventually to the resurrection on Easter day.

But what about those Greeks who came and said, "*We want to see Jesus?*" Presumably they'd heard of his teaching, they'd probably heard of his miracles, but they wanted actually to SEE Jesus as if they somehow wanted to root him in their experience.

And if you think about it, that is what people are asking to do today - they may not realise it always, but they are. In times past, the church could preach, it could lay out doctrines, it could punish those who didn't follow those doctrines. And people for the greater part towed the line: they did as they were told; they did as the church taught them. But I would suggest to you that people today no longer are willing to do that. They don't take things on the word of others. So they would say to a Christian, "Yes, you tell us all of that, but let me see him. Show him to me." On a lighter note, those of you who know the musical, the film version (or whatever) of *My Fair Lady*: there's that song when she's walked out on Professor Higgins and there's a young man who's been kind of pursuing her in lots of fine words, and she sings this very angry song at him which is, 'Don't just talk of love, show me.' And that's the repeat, right? 'Show me, show me, show me.'

And that is our calling, to show Christ to the world. And we may say, "Well, yes, we would want people to look to the Minster, to look to any church and see Christ." But are we able this Passiontide to take the further step, the bold step of saying, "Lord, let people look to ME and see the face of Christ."

In many ways, I think people can and do see the face of Christ in the work of the church. And I think perhaps never more so than at the moment when churches are often at the forefront of things like warm places in winter; of food banks; of meal services for those who are struggling with the cost of living. He often doesn't get into the media, but people are then seeing the face of Christ: the compassion; the love; the forgiveness; the inclusiveness of Christ himself.

But this 'seeing Christ' works in two directions. Before people see the face of Christ in us, I put it to you that we need to see Christ in other people, in all people, and especially those who are on the margins. As the parable of the sheep and the goats reminds us, it is when we see Christ in the poor, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, those who are on the margins of our society and see Christ in them and see them as children of God. When we can do that, then people will be able and begin to be able to see Christ in us and in our churches and the work of our churches.

And Jesus at this moment in his ministry has this universal vision of his role - "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." Suddenly it's no longer just about the Jewish people, no longer just about being the Jewish Messiah - it is being the route to God for all people. And so he says, *"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour."*

Jesus realises that not only is he at the very brink of the climax of his earthly life, the suffering to come in Holy week and good Friday, but also on the brink of his ministry going way beyond that which the earthly Jesus himself could possibly have encompassed.

So then saying, "I want those who look to St Paul's, to Beverley Minster, to any other church in the world, to see the face of Christ" we can then that step which all of us are invited to take, where we say, "I want those who look to me to see the face of Christ."

There is no higher calling.

Reading Text

John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and 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, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. ²⁷ 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰ Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler 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 indicate the kind of death he was to die.