

Sermon at Choral Evensong

Palm Sunday 2010

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John 12.20-32

The Greeks begin by asking Philip, "Sir, we are wishing to see Jesus." Philip takes them to Andrew. It may be that John singles these two disciples out because they have Greek names. Accordingly they become first disciples to bring Gentiles to Jesus. Andrew brings his brother Peter (1:42) and Philip brings his friend Nathanael (1:45). Thus, they serve as a connection between the first Jewish disciples and the first Gentile disciples

But what does the request to "see" Jesus mean? Is it to have a meeting with Jesus with a view to becoming his disciples?

Part of the problem in answering this question is that we're not totally sure who these 'Greeks' are. They might be Gentiles. Perhaps they are Hellenistic Israelites, that is, Jews who were living outside of Judah, but would make the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. It is not clear who they are but it is evident that they are somehow outside the circle of Jesus' followers.

So we might see these Greeks as belonging to that group that we have started to refer to as the 'unchurched': people outside the usual world of the church; people outside our community and our network of relations.

Many churches work under a broad unwritten assumption that the conversion to personal faith in Jesus Christ has already occurred in people's lives elsewhere and that church growth merely involves assimilating those "already converted" into the ongoing life of the congregation. Clergy and congregations see themselves as nurturers of the faith, rather than as catalysts in any process of spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals.

Let's critique this a little, however. Who is to say that these Greeks are unchurched?

They *may* be like Herod in this morning's gospel and want to see Jesus perform a miracle – perhaps Greeks, like Jews as we're told by Paul, 'demand signs'. Just before our text we are told that a crowd had come to Jesus because they had heard that he had raised Lazarus from the dead (12:18). Soon after our text we are told:

"Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him" (12:37). The place to see Jesus in all his glory is not just the miraculous (2:11, 11:4, 40), which may not produce faith; but also seeing his glory on the cross (12:23; 21:19). 1 For to return to Paul's words 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

On the other hand they *may* be people in whom God is already at work – outside the structures of Jesus' community but still in a formational way.

Even if their desire to "see" Jesus doesn't mean "become a follower," their presence relates to Jesus' statement in v. 32, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." So, as well as signaling Jesus' coming death, the arrival of the Greeks prefigures the church's future mission to the Gentiles and their inclusion in God's promises. These two things – the death of Jesus, and the mission of the church, go together.

Our focus on mission in this Lenten season has aimed to intensify our sense of the world beyond ourselves. To help us as we move away from a congregational character that says: "If we take care of our own members, outsiders will see this and want to join us." Our support for ABM, highlighted by the visit of Bishop Andrew Proud this morning, affirms the importance of verse 25 in this evening's reading – 'those who love their own selves/lives lose them, and those who are hate their selves/lives in this world will keep them for eternal life.'

The challenge faced by many churches and faith groups is whether they are willing to lose members to gain many more? Pastorally we're good at funerals for people but not so good at funerals for programmes or for our vision of the church. This is a bit like the image of planting a seed in the ground. The seed dies, but produces many more. Philip and Andrew are challenged to let the Greeks into their group, to kill off their distinctive identity.

As Holy Week approaches, the scriptures bring us near to the reality of death. Jesus has been predicting his own death and now reflects upon it:

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. Those who love

their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Jesus talks of death as if it were a necessary loss. He turns to images of nature where death and life are always cycling back and forth. The seed dies in the ground and comes up again with new life, giving a great abundance back to the earth.