



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Scripture Passages: Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So there is a pulpit – a very high pulpit, a very grand pulpit in a very grand building that I used to preach from. For many years I preached from that pulpit once or twice a month. It was a privilege and a bit intimidating at first. And I suppose if you ever got used to it or worse, began to think that you deserved to preach from that pulpit, there was something that would stop you (rightly) in your tracks and humble you and remind you of the sole reason you were there.

There were some words – words from our Gospel this morning. These words were emblazoned on the pulpit as you looked toward the people for whom you'd prepared your sermon – you could not miss them. You must see them to see the people.

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

Of course this is the Gospel of St. John chapter 12, verse 21 – and those words are carved into pulpits worldwide with good reason. I know that they convicted me every single time I saw them. They were meant to. They were a sifting principle. Each time I climbed into that high, privileged space, I had to ask myself:

Had I preached about Jesus? Had I invited the curious to come and see who he is? Had I tried to offer the follower a glimpse of the man, the teacher, the healer, the son of God, the Saviour and the redeemer?

Or had I got lost?

As one scholar wrote, clergy do “get lost sometimes. We lose ourselves in stories, in clever wording, and in those wonderful ideas we sometimes get that we just can’t help but share with our congregations. And sometimes we just get plain lost, like everyone, in the struggles of everyday life.”

The truth is, it’s easy to get lost.

“We forget so many important things when we are lost. We forget that all this ministry we are a part of has very little to do with us. We forget that it is God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is truly responsible for the calling, gathering, and enlightening of God’s people. And most of all we forget that it is Jesus, not us, who is given for the salvation of all.”

That bit is truly, truly important.

“Jesus. Not us. That is why we gather to worship. That is who we gather to worship. Jesus. Not us. We wish to see Jesus. In the same way that it was for the Greeks at the festival who went to Philip, . . . We wish to see Jesus.”

It’s a sentiment that the Israelites – the people in our portion from Jeremiah this morning know well. They were always getting lost. The prophet Jeremiah says that God- Yahweh – expresses a certain amount of exasperation with the children of Israel – God’s chosen people – because through their long history, they kept choosing away from God! I guess Israel thought it was just easier to do that through time and circumstance. But every time they broke God’s law of love, they broke God’s heart. And finally, after having watched them break the covenant between them and God amazingly creatively many times over, the Lord relents and calls them to a restart – a new covenant – The Lord says, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” And they will keep this new covenant, and live within God’s law of love because they want to, not because they’ve been forced to.

You have to wonder what would make the difference for them – why they’d want to keep the covenant this time. I suppose the hint is in the Greeks who come looking for Jesus. They come, like many come today – seeking, not quite knowing what exactly, but suspecting that Jesus is different, has something important to say, and is worth watching.

What’s really interesting about those Greeks, is that when Jesus hears that they want to see him, he takes that as a sign. One scholar likens Jesus’ realization to the one he had at the wedding at Cana – you remember at the beginning of Lent when we read the story of Mary, his mother and Jesus at a wedding where they run out of wine and she - asks him to turn the water in some big cisterns usually used for ritual washing into wine? – and you remember he resists (Woman, what is that to me that they’ve run out of wine? He says,) because he doesn’t think it’s the time for him to be revealed as the

Son of Man – but it turns out that it was his time? Well, this is another transition point in Jesus’ mission. Another moment like that. And it’s triggered by another external request. It’s quite a beautiful moment – Greeks, who represent the Gentile world – the rest of the known world (that’s also us by the way), come seeking him – they are looking to know someone, have a relationship with someone. They aren’t looking for ideas, they aren’t looking for a twelve-step program, they aren’t looking for self-help. They’re looking for the man whom everyone is talking about. They’re looking for the guy who clearly knows God intimately and can maybe lead them to her.

And because they say it right out loud, because he knows that word is spreading – that he and the works of mercy and healing he is able to perform with the help of the Father and the Spirit, Jesus just knows it’s his time again. Time to complete the mission he began at Cana. And rather unlike the other Gospels where Jesus wrestles with what it will take to bring his work to fruition, here in St. John’s gospel, the story is told a little differently. But in all the Gospel’s he is very clear about why he has come and what he’s to do. He’s to glorify God and draw all people to himself – in one great embrace of love - the very same mission that God has been working at since Noah, and then Abraham and Sarah, Moses - through all the ups and downs of escape from Egypt and wilderness through Captivity and Exile and the prophets too. And if there’s any doubt about that – the Father chimes in in a thunderous voice to confirm that mission.

So now we know that the Greeks want to see that guy. That Jesus. Because he’s in this world but he’s obviously not of it. They’ve come to see. To keep their eyes fixed on him.

Okay – so that’s what’s going on there in John’s Gospel and what’s going on in our portion of the prophet Jeremiah.

The really important question is, what’s going on in our hearts as we hear these stories? Do you want to see Jesus? I know I do – all the time. But I also know that some days I’m nervous about that too. Because, here’s the thing: once we see Jesus – experience the living Christ in our midst – and you know and I know that we know when the Holy Spirit is present – there’s no going back right? Seriously. The Spirit of Jesus guides us, and pulls us - even shoves us sometimes to make good the presence of God. And that means things will change: probably in our relationships to begin with because if I see the face of Christ in you, and if I love Jesus and have seen him, I’m going to have to treat my siblings differently to honour and love the God that I see in them.

That’s the risk right? Because Jesus – the guy who literally came to rock this world, is active, and on the loose loving the unlovely, dragging the marginalized

back into the centre, and poking and prodding those of us with power and privilege to live and treat people the same way.

So let me ask you again, are we ready to see Jesus - to embrace those through whom Jesus reveals himself? Are we ready to follow where Jesus calls us – however difficult? Faith is not a spectator sport folks. And anything in our recent history that may have falsely told us it was, is wrong. So, are we ready despite pandemic and the difficulty and pain that's brought, to keep on being the church anyway? Are we ready to give – of ourselves in service and worship - and of our money to support the ministries that are the face and hands of Jesus in Rockwood, in Fort Erie, in Burlington, in Jarvis, in Port Dalhousie, in Guelph and in Mount Forest, Cayuga and all points in between in our Diocese?

If we are, and if we like those Greeks turn our eyes toward the one who is lifted up for all to see, for all who by him are healed, restored, forgiven and then sent as his servants to be the church, then we'd better get ready for some excitement folks. Because when Jesus shows up, everything changes. For our God doesn't stand still – our God blows where he will and Gospel stuff will happen.

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