

THE CROSS WHICH JUDGES THE WORLD

JEREMIAH 31:31-34

LENT V 2018

JOHN 12:20-33

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THE JEWISH LEADERS WERE WORRIED

Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead and the people were in a frenzy. The crowds which jammed Jerusalem for Passover thronged to see him. The leaders who wanted to arrest Jesus and dispose of him wailed, "You see that you can do nothing; look, the whole world has gone after him."

AS IF TO PROVE THE LEADERS POINT, JOHN NOW TELLS OF SOME GREEKS COMING TO SEE JESUS.

These are non-Jews who have been attracted to Judaism and have come to worship in Jerusalem at Passover. They approach Jesus through Philip, himself a Greek-speaking disciple from Galilee. The Greeks express a desire to "see" Jesus, that is to say they would like understand him and possibly join his band of disciples. Indeed, the whole world *is* now going after him. Jesus is riding high on a wave of popularity and no one knows how far it will carry him.

JESUS' RESPONSE TO THIS POPULARITY IS CURIOUS TO SAY THE LEAST.

He begins talking about his imminent death. He speaks of a grain of wheat falling to the earth and dying. He pictures the Son of Man being "lifted up", meaning crucified. Taken as a response to the Greeks wanting to believe in

him, Jesus seems to be saying that he must die before the world outside of Israel can become his disciples. This is what he means by his talk about burying a seed in the ground before it can bear fruit. Very curious; I'm sure it struck the Greeks as odd; the only thing one wins by dying is the grave.

BUT THAT WAS NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT FOLLOWED.

Jesus goes on to speak of his death *as his glory*. Now perhaps the Greeks could make some sense of that kind of talk were Jesus speaking of leading an army into battle and dying in a great cause. But Jesus is talking about being arrested and crucified by the Romans. This was not only a horrible death, it was a shameful one, totally lacking in glory. We hear no more from the Greeks; they disappear like Nicodemus, no doubt grateful that they had not made a terrible mistake betting on this Jesus.

OF COURSE THIS TALK OF GLORY MAKES PERFECT SENSE TO JOHN WHO IS WRITING THIS GOSPEL

Jesus has come into the world to reveal the great and glorious love that God has for the world. Jesus is in fact the love of God incarnate; he is God's love walking around as a human person. Jesus' entire life reveals that love:

- The very fact that the Eternal Word of God would leave the bliss and serenity of heaven to enter this disturbingly dangerous and trouble-filled world is evidence of that great love. Jesus is indeed God-with-us, God's love among us.

- The first sign Jesus performed was at a wedding, a celebration of human love which is but a pale reflection of that divine love.
- Jesus came to Samaria to seek the lost and restore the broken covenant with God, thus showing God's love for the lost sheep.
- Jesus healed the lame and gave sight to the blind and brought light to those walking in darkness, showing God's love for those who were limping through life or groping in a world filled with gloom.
- Jesus raised Lazarus to show that not even death could separate us from God's love or frustrate its power.
- And finally Jesus died for friend and foe alike to show that God's love had no limits and that no one has greater love.

From Jesus' point of view, doing the will of his Loving Heavenly Father is glorious; serving God and obeying God as a loving servant is glorious. Giving one's life for those whom God loves is glorious. His death is not only his finest hour, it is his most glorious hour.

THIS STORY RAISES QUESTIONS.

Do we think these things are glorious? Judging from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, most Greeks did not. Paul speaks of proclaiming Christ crucified as "foolishness to the Greeks." Much of our culture would agree.

- Dying penniless and friendless on a cross is not glorious.
- Defeat at the hands of one's enemy is not glorious.
- Living like a homeless person without a place to lay your head at night, needing to beg for your daily bread is not glorious.

- From the world's point of view, Jesus' entire life from front to back lacks glory.
- **Our culture glorifies:**
 - The victorious and the successful
 - The affluent and the powerful
 - The popular and the beautiful
 - The self-sufficient and those who know no boundaries

We are the culture which coined the expression "no one ever remembers who comes in second" and "second place is just the first loser." And let's not forget the iconic Vince Lombardi's "Winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing."

THE GREEKS IN OUR STORY WERE AT LEAST HONEST.

When Jesus insisted on speaking about being buried like a seed or being "lifted up", they walked away. There were no Greeks in the garden where Jesus was arrested or at the foot of the cross when he died.

We however do not walk away. We want to be thought of as Christian. And so we transform him into a Jesus we can live with while clinging to the old creation and its values. We baptize American success values and call it the "Gospel of Prosperity", claiming that the penniless Jesus wants us to be millionaires, live in palatial estates, and drive obscenely expensive automobiles. Churches preaching this gospel are legion and some of them even number their congregation in the thousands.

Or we put a cross around the neck of Dirty Harry whose only answer to violence is violence in return, and claim that's what Jesus is leading us to do.

Let's face it, violence permeates our culture. On the domestic scene, our sports are becoming more and more violent. The games touted on television to be played on PlayStation or Xbox involve graphic violence on an unprecedented scale. We seriously suggest arming teachers as a way to thwart school violence. And on the International scene our first thought is rattling sabers than pursuing diplomatic solutions with our enemies.

One Christian writer has claimed that we have bought into what he calls "the myth of redemptive violence". That is to say that violence is the primary, if not the only way, of bringing order out of chaos. The myth holds that only violence will end violence and provide the security we seek. And so we deal with the enemy by violently eliminating him. We deal with competitors by bullying them. We do unto others before they can do unto us. This is the conventional wisdom of our world. And we as a culture have bought it.

BUT JESUS SAID "MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD"

Jesus believed that the foolishness of God trumped the wisdom of the world. Jesus does not respond to violence by being violent in return. The cross of Jesus reveals that violence is antithetical to the ways of God and violates the basic principle of the coming Rule of God. The cross of Jesus exposes violence as the principal tool of the ruler of this world. That is to say, it is Satanic.

Therefore, Christians must be in the vanguard of those seeking peaceful solutions to problems of violence. We Christians must check our quick-draw response which is to confront violence with more violence. The cross of Christ demands that we seek ways and means of breaking the cycle of violence.

Obviously this is an incredibly challenging undertaking, a task that admits of no easy answers or simple solutions. This is one of those tasks which Jesus might say requires much prayer and fasting. The Cross of Christ judges the path of violence. Our cross might well be seeking out alternative and more difficult paths to safety and security.

May God be with us to give us courage and guidance in leading our all-too-violent culture onto the paths that make for peace.