

## We Wish To See Jesus

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown  
Washington, D.C.

March 21, 2021 / Fifth Sunday in Lent

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*John 12:20-33*

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

As we come to the end of Lent, we find ourselves in a bit of a preparatory position, living a bit on borrowed time. Like Jesus, we know what will happen next week. We know what he means when he says that he will be “lifted up from the earth,” and we know that the day is close at hand.<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of John this morning conveys something of that sense of immediacy, of poignancy, of evanescence, which the disciples and those around Jesus must themselves have felt.

In the midst of this hubbub and hurly-burly, as time seems at once to accelerate and to slow, some Greeks come to the disciples, saying, *Sir, we wish to see Jesus*. So great was Jesus’ reputation that everyone around him, Jews and Greeks alike, were drawn to him; they wanted to see what the stories were all about.

One of the most affecting parts of Lent and Holy Week is the opportunity they provide a small but willing group to gather for prayer, to hear the Word, to remember the Passion, and to come forward again, those who wish to see Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Like those Greeks, we want to know Jesus, want to draw closer, and – like many people on the fringes of the organized church – we want to know if the stories are true.

John Newton, the 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trader turned Church of England priest, wrote somewhere north of 450 hymn texts, of which “Amazing grace” is, of course, the best known. One of his less well-known texts, however, sums up what was at stake for those Greeks, and for us, in wishing to see Jesus:

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:32

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Sayers called the Passion, rightly, the “greatest drama ever staged.” See Dorothy Sayers, *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938).

*What think ye of Christ? is the test  
To try both your state and your scheme;  
You cannot be right in the rest,  
Unless you think rightly of him.*

When the services of Lent and Holy Week work well, we are all converted, all reminded again of what we are doing here, not only this morning, but also week after week, Sunday after Sunday. Lent and Holy Week draw us back to the central truths of the Christian faith and to the Cross itself. They remind us of *what think we of Christ*.

We know well that Jesus was kindly to strangers, and the infirm, and the widow, and the beggar. This morning's narrative from the gospel of John helps fill in that picture – to flesh out our understanding of our Lord – on a more cosmic scale. “Now is the judgment of this world;” Jesus says. “Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.” When we hear “the ruler of this world,” we are not hearing about political despots and tyrants, even the most abhorrent ones. We are hearing of the great power to whom their actions point; we are hearing of the twin evils of Sin and Death, evils which I suspect we all know too well.

Sin and Death on this understanding are proper nouns, beginning with uppercase letters. In contemporary parlance – insofar as we do speak and hear about them – we are used to speaking and hearing about sin and death with lowercase letters, denoting deeds and misdeeds, or the extinction of a life. But in this context, Jesus is facing the Enemy, which is Sin and Death, a malevolent force without a body but with a definite and observable presence.

If all of this sounds a bit supernatural, then I would challenge you to observe an analogy, an analogy with that most supernatural force of all, the real god which we worship every day of our lives: the supernatural force that we call the “Market.” None can shake the Market's hand or send it a letter, and we can't even really locate it; but that makes it no less real, no less known, and no less powerful. As one New Testament scholar puts it: “It may seem reasonable enough to dismiss [the personification of the Market] as ‘mere metaphor,’ but observers from economists to comedians to theologians resist doing so; spiritual or even theological language may be required to describe accurately our disposition toward this Being.”<sup>3</sup> As to the Market, so

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Croasmun, *The Emergence of Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant in Romans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

too to Sin and Death. They may be no more than the function of their own constitutive forces, but they are real and deadly nonetheless. *Sin* is the economy of everything that happens without reference to the love of God which is made known to us in Christ, and *Death* is its inevitable result.

Paul refers to Sin and Death in similar language, saying that “we are *not* contending against *flesh and blood*, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”<sup>4</sup> Christ’s ultimate encounter will not be with Pilate, or with the religious authorities, or the bloodlust of the crowd, but with the powers of Sin and Death, which animate the forces of violence in every story in every age. Human history is a record of our impotence against Sin and Death, and conquering those powers is a work that lies within the power of God alone.

As we have observed, as we hurtle toward Good Friday, the pace of the action is accelerating, and as Jesus and his disciples are drawn toward the dénouement, toward Pilate, and toward the Cross, so are we. “And I,” says Our Lord, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” On the Cross, Jesus Christ is bound together with all of us in the final, uncharted realm of his humanity, which is suffering and death.

There is a reason why the Cross – and this is the Cross with an uppercase “C” – there is a reason why the Cross surmounts every church and every altar, why the faithful have worn it around their necks and tattooed it on their bodies for millennia. The Cross is what gives meaning to meaningless suffering. The Cross is what gives meaning to the inevitability of death. The Cross is what gives meaning to those parts of our lives, and the lives of the people we know, and the lives of everyone around the world, which we all would just rather forget.

For Christians, and for anyone else who would look upon it, the Cross is the ultimate sign and signal of God’s redemptive love for the world, our world, this world in which “the unruly wills and affections of sinful men,” try as we might, are no match for Sin and Death.<sup>5</sup> But our Lord does more than show us the way. He has gone over to the other side, defeated the Enemy that we could not – on the Enemy’s own turf – and bridged the chasm separating man from God. That is how Paul can write that “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 6:12

<sup>5</sup> Collect for the fifth Sunday in Lent, Book of Common Prayer (1979), 167.

powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

As we make our way through Lent and toward Easter Day, may we also, we who wish to see Jesus, keep our eyes firmly on the Cross, today and always.

AMEN.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:38-39