

Sermon

Sunday 21 March 2021

Lesson

St John 12: 20 – 26

In the city of Jerusalem, at the annual festival of Passover, some Gentiles approached the disciple Philip and said, ‘Sir, we should like to see Jesus’. In the poetry of the King James Version, we read that certain Greeks came to Philip of Bethsaida in Galilee and said, ‘Sir, we would see Jesus’. These unidentified travellers had journeyed to the holy city at this sacred time: they said, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’. Two thousand years later, what does it mean to ‘see’ Jesus? In our lives, may *we* speak of ‘seeing’ the Christ?

The Shroud of Turin or the Holy Shroud is a linen cloth with a negative image of a man’s face. Some believe it to be the face of Jesus of Nazareth; the burial cloth in which the dead Christ was wrapped after the crucifixion. Have the features of Christ’s face been captured? Some years ago, Pope Francis said that the shroud was the ‘icon of a man scourged and crucified’. The linen cloth has been radiocarbon dated to the Middle Ages and so not the ancient world;

nevertheless, in faith, some believe that through the fabric they ‘see’ Jesus. Sir, we wish to see Jesus’.

Visions of the Risen Jesus have been reported since the very first days following His death. Behind locked doors, the disciples of Jesus gathered together and in that intimate space Jesus appeared among them: they saw Christ raised from the dead. In the mind’s eye, the saint and first Christian martyr, Stephen, saw the heavens open and the Son of Man stand alongside God. As he was stoned to death, blow by blow, Stephen cried out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’. It was on the road to Damascus that Saul dramatically encountered Christ: a light flashed around him and a voice said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’.

If not typically within the Protestantism, a spiritual emphasis on an exploration of the inner life has brought mystical visions to the followers of Jesus in other Christian branches. Saint Francis of Assisi was said to have seen Christ: Jesus came alive and told him to repair the house of Christ. Poor and sick, Catherine of Sienna had

her first vision when she was nineteen years old. On what was believed to be her deathbed, Julian of Norwich had numerous visions which, twenty years later, she wrote in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. Teresa of Avila saw Jesus through inner visions that transformed her life. In 1931, a Polish nun, Sister Faustina Kowalska, spoke with Jesus in her vision. Her conversations are recorded in her published diary, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*. Sister Faustina wrote:

In the evening, when I was in my cell, I saw the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand [was] raised in the gesture of blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From beneath the garment, slightly drawn aside at the breast, there were emanating two large rays, one red, the other pale. In silence I kept my gaze fixed on the Lord; my soul was struck with awe, but also with great joy.

Mystical visions are personal and not in any way superior to other faith experiences, but from the earliest days followers of Jesus have ‘seen’ Jesus. Certain Greeks said, ‘Sir, we want to see Jesus’.

Besides mystical visions, may we say that through the lives of William Wilberforce and Abraham Lincoln we ‘see’ Jesus? In their

struggle against slavery, both of these great men invoked Jesus as a liberator. Gandhi and the Revd Dr Martin Luther King saw in Jesus the pattern for non-violent protest. One evening at midnight, Dr King received a telephone call. Filled with hatred and vile racism, the caller made a serious death threat against King and his family. Unable to go back to sleep, he went to the kitchen and, broken by what he had heard, he bowed down and prayed out loud. King said that, for the first time, he heard an inner voice say, 'Martin Luther, stand up....and I will be with you'. In the colourful language of the Bible, King said, 'I have seen the lightning flash. I have heard the thunder rolling. I heard the voice of Jesus.' Through his life, perhaps flawed life, and through the poetry of his words and the tragedy of his death, do we 'see' Jesus in Martin Luther King Jr?

In 2010, Margaret and Barry Mizen received a standing ovation from 80,000 people at Pope Benedict's Hyde Park Vigil. Founders of the Mizen Foundation, Margaret and Barry visit schools and try to help disadvantaged young people across the country. Margaret said, 'For me, forgiveness is about *not* wanting revenge and *not* being angry.'

Two years earlier, in May 2008, their sixteen year old son Jimmy was killed by a nineteen year old man, Jake Fahri. In a bakery in southeast London, Fahri hurled a glass dish at Jimmy; the glass hit his face, severed his jugular, and within minutes the young boy was dead. He died in the arms of one of his brothers. In the months that followed, Jimmy's older sister, who has Down's Syndrome, asked each of her siblings when they left home, 'Are you coming back?'

Jake Fahri had a string of convictions for violence and robbery involving the use of a knife, had been charged for sexual assault, used and traded cannabis and had been involved in a road-rage attack.

After the trial, standing outside the Old Bailey, Margaret Mizen thanked those in her church who had prayed for her family. She said, 'As terrible as this tragedy was, we felt blessed to have so much love in our lives. Love and prayer are what kept us going.' Margaret and Barry spoke of their faith and the inner peace they found.

They described Jimmy as 'our shining star.' The judge sentenced Fahri to life imprisonment. Margaret and Barry Mizen said that they

would pray for Jake's rehabilitation; they would pray for their son's killer. They were broken by their loss and sad too for Jake and his parents. The Greeks said to Philip, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' I remember watching the Mizen's on the news. On the steps of the Old Bailey, did we 'see' Jesus? No parent or grandparent would ever wish to go through all that the Mizen family suffered. How many families which faced this nightmare would respond as the Mizen's have done? Their Foundation continues to support young people today.

What does it mean to 'see' Jesus: a mystical vision, the pursuit of social justice, a voice in the darkness of midnight, a cry for racial equality or the miraculous strength to forgive? Sir, we want to see Jesus. Amen.