

A Mirror To The World

John 12:20 – 33

Frustrated at Jesus' popularity, so clearly demonstrated by the crowds gathered to watch him enter Jerusalem, the Pharisees cry out, "You see, you can do nothing. The whole world has gone after him!" John immediately follows this comment by the Pharisees with a story concerning some Greeks who wish to see Jesus.

The reference to 'Greeks' needs some clarification. There is a certain fascination in some parts of the Christian church with the Amish and Mennonite faith communities in Pennsylvania. These are communities who express their exclusive identity by calling everyone else 'English'. This may be a 'hand-me-down' of German/Dutch origin dating from their arrival in America when it was still an English colony. In a similar way, the Jews of Jesus' time called everyone else 'Greek'. Whatever their actual nationality or origin, they lived in Greek cities, dressed in Greek clothes and spoke and wrote in Greek. So, when we read in John, "... at the festival were some Greeks", the only thing we can say with certainty is that they weren't from Judea or Galilee.

These 'Greeks', who pop up in John as a random comment and who don't even get what they were asking for – to see Jesus – are not merely there as a reference to the Pharisees' comment, or as a cameo of John's readers, or a reference to Philip and Andrew's future mission. More than this, they point to a world-wide relevance for Jesus. Their appearance triggers the long-awaited time for Jesus to fulfil his ministry, what John calls 'the hour' – "Now is the hour, now is the judgement of the world."

The late American comedian Robin Williams liked to talk about his faith, or rather his religion, which he described as Episcopal light! Unfortunately, his experience of Christianity left him thinking that all we talk about is sin and guilt. He was more fascinated by the Buddhists. He praised the idea of self-immolation as an act of nonviolent protest; a Buddhist priest in effect saying to the world, "Here, deal with your problems!" It is a pity that Robin Williams hadn't learnt more from John's Gospel, because that is exactly how John pictures the crucifixion. Jesus, the innocent victim, is lifted up for all the world to see, in effect saying to the world, "Here, deal with your problems!"

Rather than a sad ending to a brave life, for John the Cross is 'the hour' – the glorification of Jesus as God's message to the world. John is offering, for many of us, a totally different view of the Cross and its meaning from that which we usually talk and sing about. For John, Jesus is not an innocent sacrifice to a God demanding a blood payment. The Cross is the ultimate act of non-violent protest that exposes the evil of this world to judgement – that is, to self-judgement. "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Jesus is killed because the powers of the world – religious and political – rejected the revelation of God in preference for the life that they loved. They loved their world of power, violence, corruption and fear. But rather than silencing this outspoken prophet who challenged that way of life, their actions led to the very public torture and death of Jesus, thus exposing power, violence, corruption and fear to scrutiny and judgement.

All the many victims of power, violence, corruption and fear are drawn to the Cross; to the innocent man whose suffering shows that the way of the world is not the way of life, and not the way of God. It is the one true sin of choosing your own life over the life offered by God – told metaphorically in the Eden story – that is exposed, judged and dealt with on the Cross.

John's theology doesn't seem to have taken hold in the Early Church and any idea of judgement became more about the church separating itself from an evil world – like the Amish. It was the theology of sacrifice which became the dominant explanation of the Cross. The church took on the idea of being a lifeboat to save people from the world. Lifeboats are fine metaphor for salvation but can also, in one sense, represent both victims of, and

support for, the powers of the world – the very powers that are exposed and judged by the Cross. The church too easily became, and becomes, part of the powers of the world that the Cross judges.

Picturing an evil world that must be fought or rejected leads us to the same fear, violence, corruption and power from which we are supposedly saving people. We forget the basis of our theology of Jesus – that he came because God loves the world and wants to reconcile it. What is being judged on the Cross is not the world, but the powers of the world. What is being judged on the Cross is the love of life that dominates and destroys other lives. Rather than just rescuing people, it is part of our task to continue the work of the Cross in exposing and judging the powers of the world. It is part of our task to bring God's love and desire for reconciliation, and to continue the way of undoing the great sin of loving life at the expense of God and others.

The travesty of justice, both religiously and politically, that was the Cross, exposed the powers of the world to public judgement for what they are – self-serving, vindictive and anti-life. Jesus' death on the Cross symbolised every death at the hands of those whose only interest was their own. We too have seen something similar in other images that exposed injustice and evil: the girl running from napalm during the Vietnam war; the peaceful protesters being beaten and gassed; or pastors and ministers being arrested at sit-ins.

Jesus on the Cross judged the Empire and the Temple. Unlike those other images, the Cross has a sequel that makes that judgement divine and not just political; we see the Cross in the light of the open tomb. We are not giving up life by living for God in the face of the powers of the world; we are gaining real and true and lasting life. We are returning to the life we should have with God, a life we can offer to the world that God loves, in spite of all those in the world who love their own life more.

Amen

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