

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 21st March 2021
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Collect

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Hebrews 5:5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,
'You are my Son,
today I have begotten you';
as he says also in another place,
'You are a priest for ever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.'

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Sermon by John Richardson

How many times have you missed an opportunity in life? If you are anything like me, probably quite a few. If we are not good at making up our minds we can easily miss opportunities and later regret it.

There are moments in our lives when we face what we might call “now” moments. Now is the time to make a decision. Now is the moment when my life can change for the better. Now I must make a decision or the opportunity will be gone forever.

When I read today’s Gospel that was the first thing that came to mind; that what we are hearing today is a “now” moment in the life of Jesus.

Today represents a turning point in the Gospel story as Passiontide begins. We are looking back to Lent, but forward to the events of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter. It is a turning point for John as he looks back to the ministry of teaching and healing of Jesus and forward to the last days of his life here on earth.

Notice that the word “now” occurs no less than four times in today’s Gospel - the most important being: “Now is the judgement of this world.” What is coming is crucial in the story of our salvation. And it’s happening now.

The first part of today’s Gospel is about some Greeks who have come to find out what this man Jesus is all about. Only now have people come from afar to find out more about Jesus. They will not have witnessed his healings and miracles nor heard his teaching. They know nothing of all this - only what they have heard. But the word has spread abroad. They have heard such incredible things that they just had to come and find out for themselves what this is all about. It is no longer just the Jews who are concerned about what is going on: everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, wants to know.

As for Jesus, he knows that now is the time for him to face the consequences of all that he has said and done. Now is the moment for all people to see what all this has been leading up to. Now is the moment of truth. Now the world is seeking him. Now the world must be shown that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

This is where his story has been leading. It is the time for glory. But it is not a glory that can be seen in any way as a human triumph. The glory of God of something quite different.

How can Jesus help people to understand what is about to happen? He uses the image of the grain of wheat which will only bear much fruit if first dies. This is how he sees his forthcoming death. It would be easy to avoid it, to choose the path of human glory and lead the crowds to revolution. If the grain of wheat does not fall into the earth and die, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. But it is not only Jesus who must die in order to bear much fruit.

He taught consistently that the way to life is through self-sacrifice. Those who sacrifice their lives in this world will find eternal life.

This is not easy either for us or for Jesus. So we get an insight into Jesus’ human emotions. “Now is my soul troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour.’ ‘No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.’”

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus” said the Greeks. Our task as followers of Jesus is to help everyone see him. How that happens will mean something different for each of us. But it will only happen if we see ourselves as the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies. Then the seed will multiply and bring forth fruit to the glory of God.

So for us every moment is a “now” moment. It is not a hankering after the past which cannot be changed or recovered. Nor is it a concern only for the future and what it might or might not bring. We are called to witness to Jesus by the way we respond to the now moment. Life is not about the past or the future, but about how we live in the present moment.

The Welsh priest/poet R S Thomas captured this in a poem he called “The Bright Field.” The poem reminds us that we can be so caught up in our concerns for the past or the future that we miss the wonder and glory of the present moment. We miss its opportunities, we miss its challenges, we miss its demands upon us, we miss what might have been an experience of God’s wonder and glory and grace. We miss the pearl of great price.

Here is the poem:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth,
but is the eternity that awaits you.

The poem invites us to focus on the now moment - to ensure that we do not miss or ignore it. If we do miss or ignore it we risk losing the pearl of great price. It is how we should look at the events of the final days of Jesus’ life here on earth: how he grasped the now moment.

That moment appeared at first sight to be a disaster. In grasping the moment Jesus knew where it would lead. It would lead to self-sacrifice, suffering and death. But he must become the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies. Only in this way will the love of God shine forth in the world for us all to share and to become a part of. Amen.