

John 12:20-33

In a chronological order, today's reading is actually taking place after Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a donkey.... after Palm Sunday... He has already entered Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of the Passover... The festival that commemorates when the spirit of death passed over all the homes of the Hebrew people that were marked with blood; the night of the exodus from Egypt.

These Greek men who asked to see Jesus would not have been a strange sight in Jerusalem... Greeks were known to be world travelers, and they possibly were at the temple when Jesus cleared the area. The area he cleared was the only part of the temple open to non-Jews. So it's very likely these men had seen Jesus in action and wanted to talk with him. But the significant thing about the Greek men seeking Jesus is that this is the first hint that the gospel is going to go to the entire world.

The Greeks may have approached Phillip because his name sounded Greek, but he didn't know what to do so he found Andrew. Andrew knew that Jesus would turn no one away. Has anyone ever approached you to find Jesus? Did you know what to do, or did you lead them to someone you thought would know how to help them?

Jesus answered the Greeks by saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." These men must have thought they were in for something spectacular! And the Jewish men around him would have related that sentence to Daniel 7:13 where the Son of Man received a kingdom, a glory and a dominion that were to be universal and for ever. It was time for the savagery of the world to pass, and the day of humanity to come. But Jesus did not mean 'glorified' as they meant it... by 'glorified' he mean 'crucified'.

Imagine their confusion as he continued, "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." All of a sudden he's speaking of wheat, death, fruit... it makes absolutely no sense to them. What he meant by this was that by death comes life. The single grain of wheat grain did little unless it was buried in the ground so that it bore fruit. Sometimes, it takes burying our own personal goals and ambitions for us to become useful to God. By the death of personal desire and ambition we become a servant of God.

Only by spending our life do we keep it. The one who loves their life is moved by two aims: By selfishness and by the desire for security. Neither selfishness nor security would describe the life of Jesus. Because only by service do we achieve greatness, when it is done out of the response to the love and grace God has given us through the works of Jesus and when it brings glory to God.

In the gospel of John Jesus lets everyone know about his struggle with death. John's gospel does not give us Jesus' private struggle at Gethsemane, John takes us directly to the garden. But John does share Jesus' struggle with death... in the last part of this passage where Jesus cries out, "Now my soul is troubled, 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." Jesus asked God to glorify himself, and God spoke! God spoke but the people gathered could not hear. God spoke, but the people only heard thundering. God spoke, not in a soft voice, but in the thundering like was heard when God spoke to Moses at Mt. Sinai when the Israelites were wandering in the desert wilderness.

God spoke and no one listened. God spoke to let the people know that God is near. The ruler of the world and death were about to be defeated... but not without a cost. Jesus knows the cost, those around him do not. He gives them a hint, "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself," but they still do not hear.

There is a story about an old farmer who was persuaded by his nephew to visit the big city. The young man proudly took the farmer on a tour of the large metropolis. At one point as they walked down the street the old man suddenly stopped and asked, "Did you hear that?" The young man looked at the milling pedestrians and the traffic and replied, "Hear what?" "A cricket," the old man said as he walked toward a little tuft of grass growing out of a crack next to a tall building. Sure enough, there tucked in the crack was a cricket. The young man was amazed. "How could you pick up the sound of a cricket in all this noise?" he asked.

The old farmer didn't say a word and just reached into his pocket, pulled out a couple of coins and dropped them on the sidewalk. Immediately a number of people began to reach for their pockets or look down at the sidewalk. The old man observed, "We hear what our ears are trained to hear."

Psychologist Ellen Langer says that many people are so preoccupied with their daily tasks that they rarely listen to those around them. It's like that little game that children play:

What do we call a tree that has acorns? Oak.

What do we call a funny story? Joke.

What do we call the sound made by a frog? Croak.

What do we call the white of an egg?

How many of you said, in your mind "yolk"? The correct answer, of course, is "the white." But nearly everyone gets it wrong. They've become accustomed to words ending in the "oke" sound, and so they answer, "The yolk."

How well do you listen to those around you? How well do you listen to God?

In 1992, the Washington Redskins won the Super Bowl with an explosive victory over the Buffalo Bills. Seventy five thousand people gathered on the mall between the Capitol and the Washington Monument to cheer their team and Coach. Four days later, Chuck Colson called the Redskins' office to see if any football players could attend a rally at a prison the next day. Many of the players had given their life to Christ. Joe Gibbs the head coach answered the phone and told Colson that all the players had left the city for a well-deserved rest. With his characteristic humility, Joe Gibbs asked Colson, "Will I do?"

Colson immediately accepted the offer by the coach of the championship Washington Redskins. Five days after winning the Super Bowl, Joe Gibbs could have opened any door in Washington DC but he was willing to walk behind the locked steel doors of the penitentiary for the District of Columbia to speak to men about his faith in Christ.

Joe Gibbs stood up to speak to the cheers, whistles and applause of 500 prisoners five days after he had won the most prestigious event in pro sports. He told those men: "A lot of people in the world would probably look at me and say: Man, if I could just coach in the Super Bowl, I'd be happy and fulfilled... But I'm here to tell you, it takes something else in your life besides money, position, football, power, and fame. The vacuum in each of our lives can only be filled through a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Otherwise, I'm telling you, we'll spend the rest of our lives in a meaningless existence. I've seen it in football players'

eyes, and I've seen it in men who are on their deathbed. There's nothing else that will fill the vacuum."

Joe Gibbs listened and heard more than just thunder; he heard the voice of God. He saw signs of hope and was able to help others hear the voice of God and see signs of hope. And even see signs of Christ as Jesus was lifted up and glorified through his witness.

I invite you to listen for the voice of God today, as the bread is broken and the wine poured. Somehow through God's mysterious Grace, we will be fed and we will stand in the very presence of God. A little bit of bread that reminds us of the sacrifice which Christ made for us there on the cruel cross. And a little bit of wine that reminds us of the blood he shed on our behalf. A little bit of bread and a little bit of wine will draw us to the very throne of God, the Creator. And there we will be welcomed as heirs of the Kingdom, the children of God, joint heirs with Christ, brothers and sisters with our Savior.
All glory be to God. Amen.