

Tuesday in Holy Week 2020 (A)

Summary: Dying to life

Today marks a turning point in John's Gospel. The preaching to Israel comes to an end as Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem because Jesus has grown over, beyond, Israel into the Greek speakers of the Decapolis, the Gentile world. The question they asked is ours – as gentiles – would you ask it?

Sir, we wish to see Jesus," they said to Philip. It's not an unusual request. I suspect most of us have said or thought it. One of the popular songs in my Church School was, "Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus." Why did the Greeks want to see Jesus? On one level easy to answer: he turned water into wine, he fed thousands with just a few loaves and a couple of fish, he healed the sick just as the prophecies said he would but he went further and healed women not just of physical ailments but of the non-hearing they experienced in a patriarchal culture, he cleansed the temple and challenged the political status quo with a new vision. He raised Lazarus from the dead...

It seems a simple enough request, but Jesus' response is anything but simple. I don't know what answer Philip and Andrew expected but I'll bet they did not expect to hear about death. It is probably not the answer we expect or want when we ask to see Jesus, but it is the answer Jesus gives.

"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."

It's not a 'sell' my fellow creators of YouTube videos would think attractive! But for us the spiritual mechanism of death and seeing Jesus are intimately related. To see Jesus is more than looking at him. It is more than just believing the things he said and did. We follow Christ as participants not spectators. If we want to see Jesus then we must learn to die. Refusing the invitation –we refuse to see Jesus.

Seeing Jesus means *not only* dying to all the parts of our life that blind us:

- anger and resentment; fear;
- the need to be right or to be in control; the guilt and disappointments of our past; attachment to power, wealth, and reputation;
- the ways in which we separate ourselves from one another;
- our obsessions, compulsions, and emotional agendas;
- the ways in which we hurt one another and damage relationships.

Ultimately, it means dying to the belief in our own spiritual, moral, self-sufficiency. We let go of the delicious fantasy of our own importance: We let go of our life to receive God's life. Origen has a vision of a soul plumbing the depths of evil by experiencing the horror of excess; after dying, having journeyed through hell, it eventually realises that evil has its limitations, that one can be surfeited with it to the point of utter boredom. Then God is revealed as alone inexhaustible, to whom everyone, even Satan, will turn in the end.

You've probably had at least one time in your life that when you look back on it you say, "I never want to go through that again. But I wouldn't trade that experience for anything." We can say that of our current Confinement but there will be other, more mature, experiences you can draw on. Simply moving from one country to another, from one language to another, can be the loss – the death – to which I'm referring.

As difficult or painful as that experience was it bore much fruit. You were changed and your life was renewed. It was one of those times when you were the grain of wheat that fell into the earth and died and bore much fruit.

Tuesday in Holy Week 2020 (A)

Summary: Dying to life

This work of dying is difficult and painful. Not least because, as St John Climacus reminds us 'To define repentance as the awareness of individual guilt is to risk emptying it of meaning'¹ What Jesus does is defeat the power of Death over the whole of Creation. It's an invitation not just to an individual's renewal but to a renewed vision of the holiness of all of creation, of the possibilities inherent in human society. That's what this week is about.

Holy Week is a school for learning how to die and death is the window through which we see Jesus. We must be careful, however, that we do not get stuck looking at the window rather than through the window. The 20th century Metropolitan of Moscow, Philaret, wrote

'Creatures are balanced upon the creative will of God as upon a bridge of diamond; above is the abyss of the divine infiniteness and below is the abyss of their own nothingness.'

Dying is not the end, but a means, a way of transforming who we are.

842 words

¹ *Sermons*, ed. Constantinople, p118