

Seeing Jesus

25 3 12

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world;
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory.

Today's text may be found in the gospel according to John, chapter 12 verse 21:
'Sir, we would see Jesus.' (AV)

You must know by now – mainly because it seems to come up at the start of every sermon that I ever preach to here to you at St Barnabas – that Father Richard and I both studied at the same seminary in Southgate called Oak Hill College but not at the same time. In those days, our chapel had a simple wooden pulpit which was probably little more than a foot off the ground – clearly Low Churchmanship ! And on the ledge of the pulpit, only visible to someone standing in the pulpit, was a small brass plaque which had today's text, 'Sir, we would see Jesus.' And the theme of today's sermon is unsurprisingly, therefore, 'Seeing Jesus'.

We live in an increasingly secular society where atheists, humanists and agnostics are all bent on diminishing the influence and evidence of a religious belief in our everyday lives. Smoking has been banned from public places so why not do away

with any expressions of religious belief ? After all, we don't want to shock anyone, offend anyone, upset anyone – or do we?

Do you remember the case of a woman working for British Airways who wanted to wear a crucifix outside her uniform ? Nice or tasteless ? I guess what you think might be a matter of taste. The problem for me is I don't regard a crucifix as a piece of jewellery, a fashion accessory to make you look nice. The trouble is for me, I don't think we should accept people being told what to wear if what they wear is a sincere expression of their faith: turbans, burqas, skull caps, saffron robes, a red spot on a forehead – whatever – all are outward signs of an inner reality. But if a job has a dress code and you don't like that code then why not work somewhere else ? But if there is no dress code, then what has happened to a vision of a tolerant society where difference can be respected ? Isn't that an essential part of the rich diversity that makes up our multi-cultural Britain ?

But then, as I was reflecting on today's sermon, it struck me that the cross bearing the crucified Christ; the picture you have in your sanctuary depicting the martyrdom of St Sebastian and the stained glass of St Bartholomew flayed alive, a sad pink figure holding up his skin separated from his flesh, are all images of suffering. All three suffered for the faith. All three were martyred for the faith. Each form of martyrdom was painful: nailed to a cross and slowly suffocating; being a human target for archery practice; skinned like a chicken except you're still alive! Not nice but true. Such suffering is the cost and the measure of the love of God, for us and by us.

This then is the truth at the heart of our faith: that God loves us and that he was prepared to die for us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ and that St Sebastian and St Bartholomew, both in their different ways, followed that way in order that we too might see the way.

So when those Greeks approach St Philip, friend of St Bartholomew, with their simple request, 'Sir, we would see Jesus' who and what are they asking to see? At the time I guess they were wanting to see an increasingly popular, miracle-working Jewish Rabbi who'd caused a stir by what he did and by what he taught. By Good Friday on the hill of Calvary they would have seen a man stripped naked and bleeding, nailed to a wooden cross.

But when we see Jesus, it is worth remembering – especially today on Passion Sunday – that the crucified Christ is a key image of Jesus: not because he forever hangs on the cross but because that moment in time when he did is a powerful expression of just how much we are loved and how much we, in turn, should love. Greater love hath no man than they lay down their life for their friends. And, in truth, we do have a friend in Jesus who was prepared to die that we might live.

If that is the reason why someone wants to wear their cross, then who can or should deny them? If a crucifix is a shocking image, then should we not have our eyes opened to the suffering that Jesus is prepared to endure for those he loves: you, me, all people.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Barnabas's, Old Heath

25th March, 2012

H: Sermon 25: Seeing Jesus

