

# No Safe Distance!

a sermon preached on the

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Sunday 29 March 2009

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Today's gospel is strong medicine. To be honest, it frightens me. I shudder at the words:

“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 (*ψυχη psyche*)  
destroy it;<sup>1</sup>  
but those who hate their life in this world  
preserve it to live eternally.”<sup>2</sup>

This teaching is so very familiar to us, along with its Synoptic parallels.<sup>3</sup> But I have struggled all week to find something to say about this today, trying first this way, then that, all to no avail. I suppose I have preached on this text at least four times – what's the problem! - then finally it hit me with great force. Re-reading for the umpteenth time I was suddenly struck in a new way by the request of the 'Greeks', passed on to Jesus via Philip and Andrew. Yes, I understood the significance of the approach to Jesus by 'Greeks', Gentiles, representing the heralding of the Gentile mission of the gospel in John, and Jesus' declaration that the 'hour' which he had been speaking about is now declared to have come.<sup>4</sup> And yes, the fact that they have come looking for Jesus is a critical spiritual step. But what I had not noticed was something else.

I, too, have wanted to 'see' Jesus. I have searched the scriptures, thinking that in them I will find the truth which I have wanted to see. I have studied theology and church history and the development of doctrine and the liturgies of the church. And like every other subject known to humankind - including some subjects which I studied prior to studying theology - I imagined that by such study I could gain some mastery of the truth. And I realised that when I determine that I want to 'see' something, that something, or someone, actually remains out there, at a safe distance, an object to be studied.

I don't know what those Greeks meant by asking to 'see' Jesus, but I do know the inclination to imagine that something is known by observing it. In our time and culture great stock is placed in examining things, and people, from some imagined safe distance. Indeed, one of our culture's unchallengeable gods has been so-called 'objectivity', by which it is imagined that it is possible to examine a phenomena from a completely impartial point of view. In spite of the fact that Quantum physics has established once-and-for-all that pure objectivity is impossible, nevertheless it remains like an article of religion in most disciplines of study, even theology. I have wanted to 'see' Jesus, to find out *about* him and his kingdom, to establish the 'truth' about him and his mission. And the uncomfortable fact, I realised this week, is that in my wanting to 'see' Jesus I have wanted to remain a so-called 'objective' observer, to keep my distance, to retain my independence, my autonomy.

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<sup>1</sup> For the rendering 'destroy' see Brown R E, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, New York: Doubleday, 1966, p467.

<sup>2</sup> John 24-25

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, Matthew 10:39

<sup>4</sup> John 12:23

Thursday's gospel for the eucharist, as set down in the midweek lectionary, poked me right between the eyes: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to *come to me* to have life." <sup>5</sup> Initially, of course, I thought of others to whom Jesus' condemnation seemed to apply. Then I had to admit to myself that my search for Jesus has been rather too much like my search for everything else. 'Seeing' means keeping my distance, retaining my independence, my autonomy.

Jesus' response to the request of the Greeks is very strange. They want to 'see' him, but instead he tells Andrew and Philip (and presumably the crowd which seems to surround him at this eleventh hour, just before his last supper and arrest <sup>6</sup>): that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified; that the grain of wheat must die; that those who love their life destroy it; that those who serve Jesus must follow him; that praying to be saved from this hour is a dead end; and that when he is lifted up from the earth, he will draw all people to himself.

'Seeing' Jesus, whether through Scripture, or theology, or liturgy, therefore, is not enough, and indeed is a dead end that leads away from God's glory. It is not enough to 'see' Jesus, because in this way I have attempted to keep my distance, to know 'about' something. What Jesus offers is not information *about* something, but a way of being which affords no safe 'objectivity' and requires the voluntary surrender of independence and autonomy, a paradoxical way which costs not less than everything.

Little wonder I shudder! The terrible temptation for people like me is to talk *about* religious things, while attempting to retain some imagined objective distance, to see some religious truths and tell you about them. Perhaps this is the temptation of all the baptised who are called to bear witness to Christ, called to be bearers of the evangel, the good news? I cannot, I dare not, speak about others, however – it is enough to know that it is true about me. Enough to admit that I am tempted to 'see' some religious truths, to know about some religious things.

Instead Jesus calls me to abandon objectivity altogether, which feels like death to me, since my imagined objectivity is how I have maintained some order over an otherwise threatening and chaotic world. Strong medicine indeed! There can be no 'objective' view, no safe distance. Little wonder we shudder before such a call. It is this call to which the liturgical season of Lent points, and into which Holy Week will soon immerse us.

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

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<sup>5</sup> John 5:39-40

<sup>6</sup> John 12:34