

## Sunday 17 March 2024 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

### Sermon by Harold Toms

*An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](https://tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

Our Gospel reading this morning contains what is effectively Jesus' last public teachings. Yes, there is much more to follow in His lengthy final discourse, but that is in private, with only His inner circle present. Perhaps to emphasize this point, the account begins by telling us of some who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover seeking out Jesus. We are told that they are "Greeks" though it's not clear whether this means Gentile Greeks or Jewish Greeks, that is members of the Jewish diaspora who have returned to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. They certainly seem to have been Greek speaking, whoever they were, as they seek out the disciple with a Greek name - Philip, which in Greek means "lover of horses". Philip doesn't seem to know what to do so goes to Andrew (Simon-Peter's brother) and together they go to Jesus. Curiously, it's also not clear whether they take these Greek seekers with them to actually let them see Jesus. The way John phrases it:

"Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus" John 12:22

suggests to me that they went alone to Jesus, but, the reply that Jesus gives to them, which as I've said forms part of Jesus' final public teaching, seems to be intended for them to hear. They have asked to "see Jesus" and His response, which as in so many of Jesus' responses is in the form of a parable, does seem to be intended for them to hear since it concerns what Jesus requires of His followers:

"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." John 12:23-26

To give this passage some context we need to remember that it comes almost immediately after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, after which some Pharisees comment that "the world has gone after Him". So these

Greeks perhaps represent "the world" that has gone after Jesus. It would, after all, have been more normal if they had gone straight to the Temple on arriving in the City, in order to purify themselves ready for the festival. Instead they go seeking Jesus, though somewhat tentatively via His Greek-named disciple. That tentativeness reminds me of another person who sought out Jesus, Nicodemus (the Pharisee) who came to Jesus by night, presumably so that no-one would see him.

As with Nicodemus, Jesus' response was probably not what they were expecting, because like that earlier occasion Jesus talks about His death. The glorification of the "Son of Man" is likened to a grain of wheat falling into the earth to die, so that it can be re-born and bear fruit. To Nicodemus Jesus had said:

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." John 3:14-15

The lifting up that Jesus talks about (which I am sure Nicodemus did not fully understand when Jesus said it) refers to His crucifixion, when He would be lifted up on the cross. But Jesus is not just talking about dying, in both responses He talks about having eternal life, so both that lifting up and the grain of wheat dying in the earth is not the end of the story. They are both also about resurrection, Jesus is lifted up on a cross to die but, after three days He is lifted up from the tomb, then after a further forty days He will be lifted up in the ascension. Jesus' resurrection is followed by new life, both for Himself, but also for His followers. Eternal life is not just for Jesus but for all who put their trust in Him. That trust needs to be completely in Him, the reply for those Greek seekers is clear, those who only love this life will lose it, which we know to be true, all die. But, those who hate the life of this world will receive eternal life.

We need to be careful here. This is absolutely not a call for Jesus' followers to deliberately take their own lives, no it's more about giving our lives, what we do, where we go, entirely into Jesus' hands for Him to direct rather than to simply follow our own human desires. The seeking Greeks wish to see Jesus. The ability to see what is not accessible to ordinary sight is a theme in John. Also, it is not necessary to see in the literal sense in order to believe. This gospel concludes with Jesus' words to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). The purpose of the gospel, John tells us in his conclusion, is to record Jesus' signs for those

who have not seen yet come to believe. Perhaps the seeking Greeks represent those for whom this gospel is written. They, like us, do not receive a personal audience with Jesus, but the truth is revealed to them, along with us, in Jesus' speech foretelling the meaning of his death.

I have always found this parable of the seed that must fall into the ground and die before it can bear fruit very helpful and meaningful. The story of the seed is one of hope, those that seek Jesus will indeed see Him, and see Him lifted up. John's Gospel is all about who Jesus is, where He came from and where His authority comes from. At the time we know that the disciples didn't really understand who He was or what He had come to do. We don't know if those Greek visitors to Jerusalem were taken to Jesus or not, but we can assume that they were in the city for the events that were to follow and witnessed His death, resurrection, and ascension. After these things had happened John tells us that they remembered His words and started to understand them. John writes that it will be the same for us:

“These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Amen.