

“A Small Request” – John 12:20-33

It seemed a simple enough request, at the time. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus”, they asked Philip. A perfectly innocuous request, even if it was some foreigners who made it, some Greeks. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Who knew? Who could have guessed that this one small request was the first tremor in an earthquake that would shake the entire planet, and last for all time? A simple request, passed up the chain of disciples, from the Greeks to Philip, then along with Andrew, and finally to Jesus. Who knew?

Jesus knew. Knew that this request from foreigners was the trigger, the defining moment that would set into motion the dramatic events of his last few days. “The hour has come”, he announced to Philip and Andrew when they conveyed the request from the Greeks. We don’t know whether the Greeks accompanied Philip and Andrew, although it seems unlikely. I suspect they were left waiting in an outer room while Philip checked with Andrew. “What do you think? Should we even bother him with this one?” “Ooh, we’d better, because you know how he gets when he finds out we’ve been filtering people!”

It’s probably just as well if those Greeks did get left tapping their sandals on the tiles, because I suspect they wouldn’t have made any sense out of Jesus’ answer, an answer that began with “The hour has come...”, then moved through something about wheat grains dying and bearing fruit, a discussion about serving, finishing up with “when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself” And just for good measure, in the middle of it all, a voice like thunder from heaven. The text doesn’t tell us, but I would bet that those Greeks looked at each other, said, “uhhh ... maybe we’ll come back and try again next week” just before beating a hasty exit.

But next week would be too late. Little could those Greeks, those non-Jews, know that they had triggered the events that would take the still-ringing cries of Hosanna! and turn them into hollow mocking around the foot of the cross. Even though they worshipped with the Jews at the festival, and perhaps were even familiar with the Hebrew scriptures that proclaimed the Messiah would gather all nations unto himself, they could be excused for not even suspecting that their request to see Jesus might be the fulfilling of that prediction. Just as well if they didn’t understand their role in triggering the events to come, for with their implicit signal to Jesus that His hour had come they had set in motion events that would confuse, stun, devastate all who saw God at work so powerfully in Jesus. Mind you, if they did stay an extra few days they could have seen for themselves the power of God so clearly at work in Jesus, now the risen-again Christ. The real truth is that we simply don’t know what happened to those Greeks, for as soon as they made their simple request they disappear from the story.

We do know, however, that the disciples and all who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, were thrown into great confusion and trouble not only by his answer but by the events to come. Here, after a thousand days and more of teaching and preaching with divine wisdom, of healing with hardly a word, the blind seeing and the lame walking and the lepers cured, here was this man of all power talking about ‘the end’. Talking about his death, how could this be? How could the man who walked and talked with Moses and Elijah on mountaintops die? It’s just not possible!

But it was not only possible, it was intended. “Now my hour has come”, Jesus understands, and receives his confirmation from God. The hour when he would be betrayed, and arrested, and executed upon a cross. It was a horrible hour, when not just the disciples but all of creation groaned. They never felt so abandoned, so alone, so betrayed in their faith as they did in

those days, when their Rabbi, their Master, the one they thought was the Messiah died, and left them saddened, confused, alone.

It is easy enough, I think, for us to understand how they felt. We often share the same feelings of God not being as much in control of the world as we believe He is, or should be. We submit ourselves to the constant blather on television about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the chaos in Pakistan, the posturing in Iran and North Korea, and the sucking sound of wealth being sucked down the drain all around the globe, and we wonder where truth is, and where God is in all of this? Has He recoiled in horror from the sickening sights of old people and children alike torn into shreds? Has He closed His ears to the screams of pain, the wails of grief? We read about people becoming sick and dying from a new simple but deadly disease, and we become afraid, and we wonder where God is in all of this? Where is the compassion and love in the midst of a disease so virulent that it separates people at the very time they most need the comfort of loved ones. We hear the stories of people losing their jobs, their lifestyles, their families and friends, and wonder how God could allow such distress and misery to happen. We experience pain, and loss, and feel emptiness, and wonder if God even hears our cries. At these times we often feel so let down we cannot hear the promise in Christ's answer to the Greeks, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me."

What those Greeks could not know as they triggered the events to come, what the disciples could not understand as those events unfurled around them, but what Jesus understood clearly was that the hour to come was in truth a moment of glory. The hour that came was to the glory of God, and to the revealing of His grace in the new covenant He established. A new covenant promised through the prophet Jeremiah, and fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, the Christ.

We can understand, and share to some extent, the confusion and grief of the disciples as they witnessed the tragedy triggered by the request from the Greeks, as they watched the one they thought was the Son of Man die. But we also have the privilege to receive, and to share in their witness to his conquering of even death itself, proclaiming through his rising again from death God's glory, God's mercy, God's grace. "I am going away", Jesus told his followers, and he did. But he also told them, "I will return", and he did. In terrifying but overwhelmingly joyful visits his followers encountered him, touched him, ate with him, reveling in the grace and the glory of God shown by his return. Living out his promise of returning to them, they became able to hear and to understand, to accept and to believe him when he told them he would go away again, but that he would ask the Father to send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Their testimony to us in scripture, in tradition, in the church continuing as the body of Christ is that Jesus' promise to send the Spirit was truly fulfilled. From the fiery display at Pentecost, through their own trials and tribulations, even to their own deaths, the followers of Christ have proclaimed throughout the ages that God's Holy Spirit has lifted them up out of their despair, their grief, their isolation. Whether through a blinding encounter such as with Paul on the road to Damascus, or a more subtle nudging to make the right decision, God's Holy Spirit has been and continues to be active in the lives of all who would be receptive.

I suspect most, if not all of us here today could relate instances in our lives when we have been 'steered' by God out of dangerous situations, or have received an insight about someone that allowed us to be compassionate instead of demanding. I would guess that all or most of us can recall the gentle hand of God on our shoulder, bringing comfort in times of grief, assuring us that there is meaning to life, and hope for us.

But it's often difficult, isn't it? If we are honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that there are many times when we ask, "where is God in all of this?" many times when we feel alone. The worst of those times are when we are sure that it is something we have done that has caused God to drop us, to let us wallow alone in the morass of our own misdoing. Those are the times when we envelop ourselves in a fog of misery, making it impossible to see any solutions. Those are also the times we need to let the wind of the Holy Spirit blow away that fog and haze, to blow away the cobwebs and dirt that we feel binding us in our misery, to let the Holy Spirit lift us up to where we can see clearly again. This is no fanciful dream; this is no empty promise. God the Father, in His mercy and to His glory, has delivered the Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus the Son, sending that Spirit to comfort us in our times of grief and distress, to guide us when we are confused or misdirected, to accompany us through our times of loneliness and despair, in all things and at all times lifting us up.

Who could have known? Who could have known that such a simple request, "We wish to see Jesus" would be the trigger for such monumental, earth-shaking events. Who knew? Who knew that our own request, "I'd like to see Jesus" would trigger for us and in us events of such glory and grace? And yet it's all there, laid out by God for us, to His glory, from the promises of old fulfilled in Christ, to the promises fulfilled for us to this very moment.

We do not know, we cannot understand all of the events that surround us, either personally or globally. But we do know, we can understand, that throughout it all God is present with us, lifting us up with His Holy Spirit, sustaining and supporting us until that day when we are for the last time drawn up to be with Christ, as he has promised.