

“A Seismic 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 – a few Greeks – who made the request. “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. He knew that this request from foreigners was the trigger, that 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 as they passed the request on up the chain, although it seems unlikely. I rather suspect the Gentile foreigners 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 they most likely 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, and then 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 they beat a hasty exit.

But next week would be too late. Little could those Greeks, those non-Jews, know that with their simple request 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 warring in the Middle East, the posturing in Iran and North Korea, and the sucking sound of wealth being vacuumed into corrupt pockets all around the globe, and we wonder where truth is, and where God is in all of this?

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 had come was to the glory of God, and to the revealing of His grace in the new covenant He established. Hear that promise in Christ's answer to the Greeks, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me." This was the 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 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.

All of these glorious events were set in motion with that simple little request, "we wish to see Jesus." A simple request made not by faithful righteous within Jesus' own Judaism, but made by foreign Gentiles; and yet a request that began a chain of events leading to the death and resurrection of Jesus, to the new covenant with God in Christ, and to our own faith.

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.

If such a simple little request from those Greeks could set in motion such earth-changing events, consider what impact simple little requests from us might accomplish. Yes, we pray for world peace, and we really mean it when we do, but a request with such a broad scope sometimes sounds a bit like a line from the movie "Miss Congeniality." Perhaps we might be able to learn from those Greeks that we can scale back a bit in our requests and leave the heavy lifting to God.

Not that our requests in prayer to God have to be for tiny outcomes ... take our redevelopment project as an example. I can't count the number of times I've lain awake at 3am wondering how we are going to ever take the next step, but I have learned that my simple prayers for some peace and assurance from God as I turn it all over to him have been answered one-by-one, and here we are on the threshold of an exciting new chapter in the life of Central. Neither can I count the number of other simple prayers that have been answered, and often in ways as surprising and as full of grace as was that request from the Greeks to the disciples. Indeed, some of those prayers of mine have been larger and more complex, and a few have taken twenty years and more to finally unfold – again almost always with a surprising twist of grace.

I suspect that many of you have had similar experiences, that you can recall with clarity a prayer request that you have made, and which has been answered. Perhaps you may be able to recall a number of such answered prayers, and by the grace of God will be able to testify to more.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” What a simple little request, but one that set in motion events that still change the world, events that still change our lives. What is your simple little request to Jesus that will change your world? When will you dare to ask it, with trembling and yet with confidence that your request will be fulfilled, and more?