

## *Some Gays come to Jesus*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Fifth Sunday in Lent—22 March 2015

*Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 119: 9-16; Hebrews 5: 5-14; John 12:20-33*

'Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some gays. They came to Philip, who was very much at home in O'Connor sharing that whole inner-city vibe, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." '

This modest word-shift in today's gospel makes vivid for us in our day what was at stake in Jesus' day with the arrival of those Greeks. The language makes clear they were actual foreign converts to Judaism, not Greek-speaking native Jews. In other words, they were aliens from a world commonly held to be immoral and unfit. And yet here they were, bold as brass, respectfully but insistently presenting themselves at Jesus' door. The symbolic significance of this is not lost on Jesus, whose reply to your man St Phillip, and to Andrew, no doubt puzzled and unsure, was to declare solemnly that a decisive moment had come, and that at last God would reveal God's hand. Here we have an event in John every bit as significant as the transfiguration moment in other Gospels.

Now what's going on here? Why is this unexpected appearance of unlikely outsiders, seeking an audience, the onset of something as cataclysmic as the death of Jesus and his glorification by God? Let me explore this with you in the light of our Gospel and other scripture readings today, and in light of this Lenten Eucharist we celebrate.

I'm convinced that all this has to do with God's call to maturity in our religion, which is an unwelcome call that's everywhere resisted. For religious people of every sort, in every nation, the normal business of religion is to provide us with a reassuring framework that keeps the doubts and fears at bay, which consolidates our sense of who we are as worthwhile people, and which establishes us in a community of the like-minded where our accustomed views of things are reinforced. In this respect, all religion is a human invention, and in this respect only I'm quite sympathetic with the atheists who reject it.

Jesus calls us beyond this typical human religiousness into realms less certain, less comfortably familiar, more challenging; the arrival of these Greeks is a sign that we're being shifted out of our comfort zone. The crisis our Anglican Communion is having over the blessing of monogamous same-sex unions and the ordination of gay clergy is today's version of the same challenge. The problem is that the gatekeepers of an anxious faith want to keep everything nice and safe, and the arrival of ill-fitting outsiders with their unfamiliar questions, habits and agendas is just too disruptive. Jesus knows that the arrival of these Greeks, or these gays to bring things up to date, means trouble. He knows that the community will have to do its usual thing in the face of all such disruption and uncertainty and find a scapegoat, so business as usual can be restored by a bit of good, old-fashioned bloodletting. And Jesus has worked out that it's going to be him: 'The hour has come for the son of Man to be glorified.'

Why glorified, when what Jesus means is being falsely accused, hounded and murdered? Because in John's Gospel the judgement of this world, and the triumph of God, begins when the truth about things is revealed in what happens to Jesus, in his rejection and scapegoating. Jesus is the light who has come into the world, according to John, in whose light all our darkness is shown up for what it is. Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of self-professed Godly people reveals the nature of immature religion, the sort that likes its certainties and comforts and won't tolerate the challenge that Jesus brings from God. The challenge is to discover a

new human family of insiders and no outsiders, in which you and I have nothing to fear, nothing to protect nervously, no anxious self to coddle and defend, so that we keep others at arm's length in an adversarial mood of peevish self-justifying tribalism. No, this mechanism that makes the world go round—this satanic parade that blights our world affairs, our politics, our family and community life, even the life of our Churches—this mechanism is shown up by Jesus and in being shown up its overcome: 'Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out'. And at the same time, Jesus reveals his new, poised, inclusive, compassionate and confident version of religious humanity: 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' Jesus reveals the truth about the way the world works in his death, but in so doing he reveals a new world in which all people, not just those we like and approve of, receive their proper welcome from God.

This mature religion is what Jeremiah talks about this morning. Not the attitude of past times, when God's gracious covenant was broken by the people when it no longer gave them what they wanted, when the going got tough and they became nervous and went their own way, as people still do today when their religion doesn't seem to be meeting their personal needs as presently understood. Instead of this fragile religion, God calls us to a new covenant that's genuinely owned and inhabited, a mature life with God that leads to our transformation. This is the mature spirit of the psalmist today, who though apparently a young person is nevertheless full of Godly wisdom, seeking to be conformed in the depths of his person to the ways of God: 'I will meditate on your precepts, and give heed to your ways; for my delight is wholly in your statutes, and I will not forget your word'. Here is a person of mature and maturing faith, not content with the externals of religious belonging but in search of deep inner transformation—a model for the young among us, and for the old.

Friends, this is the solid food the writer to the Hebrews commends to us, in our second reading today, beyond the milk for infants that many religious people prefer. Jesus opens for us a way of being human beyond nervy self-preservation, beyond religion's regular obsession with security, certainty and shoring up the status quo. Jesus gives up all of this and throws himself on the mercy of God. He doesn't give way to hating, either—that other standard avenue of defensiveness in the face of provocation. His faith prays through anxiety and makes its home in uncertainty, and clings fast to God even in the face of the cross. Thus the single grain of a nervous me-centred life is allowed to go into the dark earth of doubt and hurt and to die there, so that from it anew life emerges beyond the fragile ego and the nervous individualism it spawns—a fully personal, relational, confident and nurturing life that bears much fruit. This is what Jesus means when he tells us we must hate our life in this world. He invites us to join him in his radical freedom, finding that we become fully alive, fully who God made us to be, when at last we pass beyond nervously insisting on our own way, on our own comfort, on our own peace of mind, on our own accustomed version of ourselves, and on any religious habits that regularly serve to support us in a less than mature state of life.

Hence we have the Eucharist week by week to call us beyond our personal devotion and our comfortable habits of mind into a bracing confrontation with God's word, with the unspeakably loving offer of Jesus' own self for us, week by week, under the forms of bread and wine, and the gift of one another as fellow members of the body of Christ, to be cherished and borne with and embraced even though this can be the hardest part of Christian life.

The season of Lent, too, is a call to maturity in faith on the way to Easter. It's a time of admitting that we may not have it right in our faith, in our Christian practice, in our habits as individuals, households, congregations and Churches, that we may have preferred comfort and control over the challenges that God brings us and our I Church in Christ, symbolised by the arrival of those Greeks (or those gays). The message of our readings today, and of our

Eucharist especially in the season of Lent, is that God is challenging us to embark with Jesus Christ on the road less travelled, trusting ourselves and our futures to God's wisdom, which is a better bet than trying to secure our own future by immature, ultimately ineffectual means. The cross casts its shadow over us, and the Greeks are at the door. We can't retreat from this—our best chance is to follow Christ into the thick of it.