

Lent 5, Year B

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Jeremiah 31:31-34
Ps 51:11-16
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

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Today's gospel mystery question is:
Did the Greeks ever get to see Jesus?

The story from the Gospel of John says that some Greek Jews were in town for Passover, and they approached Philip, because Philip had Greek tendencies—he was from a Greek area and had a Greek name. The Greeks came to Philip and said “We wish to see Jesus.” Philip went to Andrew and together they went to Jesus and told Jesus that some Greeks wanted to see him.

Then Jesus' answer to them was not, “Let the Greeks come unto me,” Jesus answered by saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Doesn't it seem like part of the dialogue is missing here?

Because this is an indispensable point of scripture, and a point of Christian orthodoxy, I would not dare say the missing piece of dialogue would be, “Well OK, but do you want to see these Greeks or not, because they're waiting over there?”

Do *YOU* think the Greeks ever got to see Jesus? Does it matter?

Jesus goes on to say, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies...”

During Lent and Holy Week we always know the end of the story, We know that this season and story ends with Easter, with Christ's resurrection. Sometimes this can make Lent a season of theological reflection or discourse, and perhaps, some minor sacrifice or project, if we can carry our Lenten discipline all the way through to Easter, but we don't think about the reality of a *death* coming up. In general, we don't like to spend a lot of time thinking about death. And some of us don't like to even say ‘Jesus' death' without adding ‘and resurrection’

You know the old expression:

“Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die,” which isn't completely true.

“Everyone wants to be resurrected but nobody wants to die,”

“Everyone wants to bear much fruit, but nobody wants to disintegrate in the dirt.”

My childhood home was quite religiously observant, of the Anglo-Catholic kind. During Lent we had regular reminders, and it couldn't slip from *anyone's* awareness that it was Lent was going on. We didn't eat meat on Wednesday or Friday, we went

to mid-week services as well as Sunday, we postponed parties until after Lent, we made confessions, we had to *declare* our Lenten discipline, and our daily dinner prayers took on a more serious and penitential tone.

When I was a small child I honestly thought that the primary purpose of Lent was to keep us from getting too frivolous or having too much fun in an otherwise life-giving season.

“Don’t forget, Jesus died for your sins.”

We didn’t say ‘in the spring’, we said ‘during Lent.’ We marked the entire year by the liturgical year. I did not grow up loving the Lenten season, but I believed every word of it. I have to say it left some damage. We didn’t say ‘in the summer’ but ‘after Pentecost.’

But, even with that, we always knew that Easter would come, and we could be happy again –after an extensive fast and then mass.

This past week I was reading this sentence from the Gospel of John, – “If a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies...” and I had a moment of terror and understanding. I felt in the depths of my being a profound truth that I had only known before as a concept or a thought:

This is a story of a murder. That’s not all it is, of course, but it’s a murder story, too.

Somebody really is about to die and it’s Jesus!

Jesus says, “NOW is the hour! It’s happening right NOW.

This part of the Lenten story isn’t “You need to change your evil ways, baby, before I stop loving you,” as Carlos Santana wrote, and as Lent is sometimes understood. It’s not about that at all. Jesus is talking about his own death, not how others should behave.

Ps 51, the wonderfully rich psalm that we read today, talks about our evil ways, what it calls our ‘sins,’ Or in older versions, our “iniquities.” This psalm, written for a particular circumstance, has expressions of feelings and thoughts that most of us have felt. It’s a wonderful psalm, a 12-step psalm. The psalmist says, “Yes, I know who I am. I think about my sins all the time.”

But the phrase in psalm 51 that I want to talk about is this:
in King James language:

*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
In sin did my mother conceive me.*

In NRSV language it says:

*Indeed, I was born guilty
A sinner when my mother conceived me.*

What a distasteful little piece of text, if perhaps, true. That just doesn’t sound fair— what about the innocence of babies? Of course, that was before I been around very many babies. Perhaps it isn’t fair.

But really, it's about the truth, the reality that our character begins to be formed at the time of our conception. We get a unique set of blended genes. It's about the genetics we inherited and the conditions of our gestation and birth. In the discussion about nature and nurture, that is:

how much human beings are born with who they are versus how much are human beings a product of their environmental,

Even science is coming down strongly these days on the side of us being hard-wired, so to speak, for many, even most, physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual, and chemical traits. It isn't just our race and class and culture, though we're born of and into those, too.

Of course environment does play a big role. There's much study of the influence of birth order, relationship with parent and siblings, food and shelter, absence or presence of love and warmth, and certainly, throughout our lives we do live and die with the choices we make, although not all of those are completely volitional, since every thought we have and every move we make is a congenital chemical process.

But whatever we got at birth, we are not exempt from responsibility for our own behavior. Whatever that means.

(I have to say, I'm tired of corporate criminals saying, "I take full responsibility." What does that mean in terms of their repentance and restitution?)

A man I know was born into a poor family of 14 kids. He was someplace in the middle of that. His alcoholic and abusive parents had been abused themselves. He said, "We just didn't have chance. We were like deer in the headlights, stuck in place, in the world we had been born into, with our conception and birth already polluted."

He is working hard against his very nature to have a decent quality of life, and he has made excellent progress. But certain things about him he will never be able to change. He can only work to override those things that could cause his destruction, and come to terms with the other inherent things that may or may not be a blessing.

Not very many of us came from mothers and fathers who really had it together. For the most part, they did all they could do, given their own conception, birth and upbringing. It might have been good or it might have been horrible. It seems like most were in between. We were born from them and out of them.

But the real point here is: We're pretty much born who we are.

We show up on this earth with a past,

Born With a Past

and a start on the personality we will have.

We're born male, female,

Addiction prone or not;
 Gay, Lesbian, straight, bisexual, transgendered,
 balanced neurochemically or not,
 prenatally nourished or not,
 black or white, and
 Jew or Greek.
 (disclaimer: humanity is not limited to these example groups)

As a species, we seem to need to identifying some of us as IN and some of us as NOT IN. They are like us or they are not like us. It seems to be one of those in bred traits that requires constant attention. The bible describes many peoples, nations, who don't like other peoples, even those not so different from them.

First century Jews did not think highly of Greeks. They had unclean ways, from a Jewish perspective. Not circumcised, ate unclean food, and other problems. From Jewish perspective, Greeks were not IN; Greeks were NOT IN.

They weren't even OUT, if you can get this distinction, because either you're IN or not. You're either US or NOT US. There wasn't much of a view of the NOT IN. You're A or Not A

Social scientists say that class distinction can only be seen from the bottom up, that the very wealthy only see US and NOT US, and that stratification can be seen only in the classes who are part of it. That might be part of our problem with some of the wealthy corporations top officers – the belief that OUR WAY is and should be normal for us, and that others just AREN'T US, and, of course, live another way.

There is a similar problem with, in a vain attempt to use gender inclusive language, the pronouns are only male or not male. Unless we use specifically female words and pronouns, we're left with male and not specifically male. It's Male or OTHER (which in many people's minds remains male). A or Not A. We need male and female.

The Greeks were NOT IN and the law kept it that way. Jews did not eat with Greeks; they did not socialize with them. If you didn't eat with Greeks, you wouldn't know them, you wouldn't sleep with them, and you wouldn't sleep with their gods. That was the law written in Torah, along with many other rules that Jeremiah speaks of in the first reading that had been broken by people.

A teacher named Michael Fishbane wrote a book called The Garments of Torah. In it he talks about how interpretation of the law has evolved and been lived out through the years. One idea is that the law is always there, but it doesn't mean the same thing to each person studying it. In Judaism, all interpretation is sometimes referred to as "given at Sinai." All honest interpretations after study deserve equal merit. All interpretation and behavior based on study can be understood as just the Garments of the Torah. How we live and interpret the bible are just the clothing that the law

wears – different in different eras. The law itself is deeper. The Torah is a deep justice and blessing held in our hearts. Even the words of the law are just garments. The garments of the first century law declared that Greeks were out.

My old Revised Standard Version bible places topic headings, kind of like newspaper headlines, over various stories. In the Book of Acts Verse 10, a headline appears that says, “**Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit.**” They’re talking about Greeks there. The article says:

“...the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.”

And they had to allow as how maybe the Greeks should be baptized after all, even if they weren’t...you know...

But that is from the Acts of the Apostles – It’s after the death and resurrection of Jesus, an important distinction in the Gospel of John.

During his earthly life, Jesus’ teachings and contacts were almost completely confined to Jews.

The stories we read about Jesus and the Gentiles- were exceptional and individual, like the Gentile woman who begged Jesus to cure her sick daughter (the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter, possessed by unclean spirit).

And each time they Jesus encountered one of these circumstances, he seemed to have some reluctance to break the Jew-Gentile barrier. He didn’t touch the woman.

It’s not exactly how, at least I, like to think of Jesus. My picture is that he always included everyone, but that’s not so. If you look at the stories in the gospels, the questions from people, and the teachings he delivered were from within the Jewish community. He only went so far in crossing the cultural and religious boundaries.

And what about those Greeks who went to see Philip and Andrew so that they might broker for them an audience Jesus? What in the world did that answer Jesus gave have to do with the question? “The time has come for the son of Man to be glorified.”

If this Gospel were history, it wouldn’t have anything to do with the request to see Jesus. But this isn’t history, it’s a theological teaching written by John 80 to a 100 years after the death of Jesus to show Jesus as the Messiah. Within that understanding, Jesus apparently unrelated answer has everything to do with the Greeks request to see him.

If the Greeks are seeking Jesus, that is understood as a sign that the time is NOW. Spreading of the Gospel to the gentiles will be able to start.

But with that understanding, the only way that fruit could be produced, that the Gospel could be spread, was if the old Jewish law that kept people apart was reinterpreted and no longer understood as a barrier between the Jews and all other

people, and the only way that could come to pass, was if Jesus' time came, and he were glorified – if he died and was resurrected..

If he died, he would be resurrected, "glorified," so that THEN all people could be wrapped in to the good news of God's love.

And that universal understanding of God's love was, IS, the new reinterpreted law written in the depth of our hearts.

So, before the murder and resurrection of Jesus, not everyone was IN, even in the mind of Jesus, or at least in the mind of the writer of this Gospel.

To me, this is an odd construct, and a 'hard saying,' as is said elsewhere in the Bible. It's no wonder it isn't preached about much, at least in this way, in the Episcopal Church.

It is much easier to simply say that growth of the new requires death of the old. If we are seeds remaining in a seed packet, we will remain seeds in the seed packet, until we die as seeds.

But if we are willing to go into the dirt and disintegrate as a seed, we can bear fruit. We know this is true in both the micro and the macro. All of us have experienced it, but can we volunteer for it? Usually it's forced on us until we give up. To tell the truth, it sounds like Jesus didn't look forward to it wholeheartedly, either.

So did those Greeks get to see Jesus? Not yet, only later, in the understanding of this teaching. And it does matter, at least to John who wrote this Gospel. It matters because the Greeks are a sign that SOON the Good News will be spread to all people.

And that the soon that is written about in the Gospel of John is NOW.

By **dying** and being lifted up—resurrected – Christ draws all people, no matter what they were born into, into anointing of Christ.

In her poem "Wild Geese" Mary Oliver wrote:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 The world offers itself to your imagination,
 Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
 Over and over
 Announcing your place
 In the family of things.

And, I would add, in the family of Christ.