
When Will the Time Come to See Jesus?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Lent 5 – Year B

“My time has not yet come!”

According to the Gospel of John, that is one of the first things Jesus is recorded to have said. “My time, my hour, has not yet come.” He said it when people wanted him to perform some great and miraculous sign. In fact, they were all at a wedding, and the wine had run out.

Was that really so much of a catastrophe? Well, maybe here in Atlanta, that has to be the dreaded fear of every wedding host. “Whatever you do, don’t let the wine run out!” In Cana of Galilee, the wine ran out one day, and apparently it was a big thing.

Jesus was already becoming known as someone who could do wonders; at least his mother thought he could do wonders (as all mothers do!). She went up to Jesus and noted that their friend the host had run out of wine. But Jesus brushed her aside, saying, “My time has not yet come.” That was John, chapter two (John 2:4).

Later in Jesus’ ministry, he is becoming more known as a great teacher. Some of his remarks are enigmatic, but they point all the more to his wisdom. He is someone worth listening to. So, in John, chapter seven, they call for more; they think he may be the Messiah. And Jesus repeats what he has said before: “My time has not yet come” (John 7:6). First, when people wanted someone who did great signs and wonders, his time had not yet come. Now, when people want a great teacher, his time still has not yet come. When will the time come to see Jesus?

Then, a third time, in John, chapter eight, he is talking about something even more powerful than signs or teaching. “I am light,” he says. “I am the light of the world.” Here, Jesus is becoming known for a power that goes beyond our human cravings for signs and wisdom. He is light itself. But the gospel writer, John, declares again, “His time had not yet come” (John 8:20). So, again we ask, for the third time, “When will the time come?”

Now, in today’s gospel passage, we hear a passage from later in the Gospel of John, chapter twelve. Some Greeks come to see Jesus, to pay a visit, to check out this amazing person who is becoming known to people even beyond the local Judean population. “Sir,” they say, “we wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21).

Those curious seekers—the “Greeks”—are important for us today. They represent all the various ways that both the local people and the foreigners had wished to see Jesus. Today, I believe that those so-called Greeks represent the culmination of the universal human search for God.

What are the various ways we wish to see Jesus? First, some of us wish to see Jesus as a wonder worker. He is the person we pray to when we are sick, or confused, or in any kind of need or trouble. Our needs are often deep and troubling: an unjustified death, cancer in someone we love, needless tragedy. And sometimes our needs are quite small; there is no wine at the party! And Jesus does perform wonders for us, whether the need is great or small. Jesus heals the sick; and he actually did turn some water into wine at that wedding.

Second, some of us wish to see Jesus as the great teacher. He is our rabbi, someone whose wisdom stretches us and challenges us. “Blessed are the poor. The greatest among you is the one who serves. Turn the other cheek,” he said. This second group of us admires the keen wisdom of Jesus.

Then, thirdly, some of us do believe in the divinity of Jesus. We wish to see Jesus in his divinity. He is a Truth and Power from beyond us. He is the Light of the world. We see Jesus when we see light, when we see truth, when we see mystical presence.

These are all ways that we wish to see Jesus, just like those visiting Greeks did. All these wishes are wrapped up in the presence of “the Greeks,” here in the Gospel of John. Their desire, from an outsider group, from the world, represents the desire of universal humanity, all over the world: “We wish to see Jesus.”

And so, Jesus shows them. In three previous occasions in the Gospel of John, when the people wanted signs, when the people wanted teaching, and when the people wanted light, Jesus had said, quite plainly, “My time has not yet come.”

But this time, here in John chapter twelve, when the Greeks ask, when the whole world asks, Jesus says something different. He says, “My hour, my time, has come.”

His time has come. Finally! What will he now say and do?

Well, he says something dramatically different from what he has said before. He does not perform a sign, or speak a wise teaching, or demonstrate divine light.

No, he talks about death. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to indicate what kind of death he would die” (John 12:24, 32-33).

What has happened in this gospel? How does Jesus answer the Greeks’ desire to see Jesus? He offers them his suffering and death. Oh yes, they will see, they will see Jesus. They will see the true Jesus when they see someone dying an innocent death, for the sake of love. They, and us, are meant to see Jesus being glorified, not by doing great signs and teachings, but by dying for the sake of love.

What can this possibly mean for us, today, for us who want to see Jesus, or for anyone who wants to see God?

It means that “Jesus’ time” is not when he shows miraculous signs, not when he speaks wise teaching, not when he demonstrates divine light and power. Jesus’ time, Jesus’ hour, is when he submits to suffering and weakness. We see Jesus when we acknowledge a grain of wheat falling into the ground. We see Jesus when we see an innocent victim being lifted up in death. Forgiveness delivered from an innocent man saves all of us.

Can we still see Jesus today? Yes, we see Jesus whenever we see someone choose humility over power. We see Jesus whenever we acknowledge weakness over false strength. When we see someone offer herself for the greater good, or when we see someone touch the outcast and forgotten with love, we see Jesus. We see Jesus whenever the innocent suffer, not so much when miracles happen, but whenever a grain of wheat falls into the ground and causes another person to grow.

Do we really want to see Jesus? In the same way that Jesus answered the Greeks’ wish to see Jesus? If so, we will have to look at weakness and suffering and even innocent death. We will have to go through Good Friday, as we will not many days from today.

Yes, Jesus suffers. But his own suffering means that he touches people who suffer. You who have suffered this year have seen Jesus. You who know weakness this year have seen Jesus. Finally, those of us who have experienced death—in any way—those of us who have known death know now how Jesus answered the Greeks, and we know what Saint Paul meant when he wrote later to the Corinthians:

“[Some] demand signs and [others] desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Judeans and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both neighbors and foreigners—northerners and southerners—easterners and westerners—whoever!—Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

AMEN.

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