
How Do We See Jesus?

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Fifth Sunday in Lent – Year B

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (John 12:21)

It was just before the Feast of the Passover, about this time of year. Some visitors to Jerusalem had heard of this Jesus, apparently a phenomenal person; and so they had approached Philip, one of the followers of Jesus, with their request: “Hey, man, we want to see Jesus.”

The media were there, taking pictures of the event! Their illustration is right back there in one of the stained glass windows of this cathedral! Second from the back, on the left as you face the altar. There is Philip, with five Greeks behind him asking to see Jesus! “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

I once served a church, up in Connecticut, which was noted for its beautiful stained-glass windows (though they were not as glorious as ours at St. Philip’s!). I was in school in those days, and my internship meant that I taught the children. It’s a glorious task to teach Sunday School to children. No adult can properly be called “educated” until you have taught children!

That Connecticut Sunday School class was embarrassingly small. There were only a handful of five-year olds that morning. As usual, there was no annual curriculum. The church’s stained glass windows were so detailed and marvelous, that they provided us with an easy lesson plan. Our lesson plan was simply to walk through that beautiful building and use the windows as teaching devices. The parables and the miracles and the events of Jesus’s life were all there. I was showing the children Jesus, and we were having a beautiful time.

Then, suddenly, one five-year old little girl stopped and pointed to the crucifix, a cross with the limp and dying Christ hung over it. “Who is that?” the young girl asked. She did not know.

I said, as gently as I could. “Well, that’s Jesus.” She was puzzled. “Jesus?” she questioned.

“Yes,” I continued. “That’s Jesus when he died.”

She pondered for a minute. Then she concluded, “No. no, that’s not Jesus. Jesus is a little baby. Jesus is a little baby in a manger.” (And remember: this was before the days of Ricky Bobby!)

That little girl was right, of course, and I told her so. Yes, Jesus is a little baby in a manger. Jesus is especially a little baby in a manger for little girls who are five years old. Little children with no concept of death yet, see Jesus as a little baby in a manger. And no other image will change that infant image.

“Hey, we wish to see Jesus.” That is our request no matter how old we are. No matter whether we are Christian or not. Each of us wants to see this savior.

And each of us who claims to be a follower of Jesus hears the request, too. Hey, are you one of the followers of Jesus? Then show us Jesus! We wish to see Jesus.

When I was teaching that little child, in order to show her Jesus, I had to give up my own image of Jesus; I had to give up my image of Jesus on the cross. (And she was learning to give up her image of Jesus, too!) Further, it was certainly a correct image that I was giving up, wasn’t it? I also had to give up my lesson plan in order to allow that child to see Jesus.

There are all sorts of folks trying to show us Jesus, aren't there?

In this politically charged and politically absolutist age, some folks would show us Jesus as the great Conservative. Their antagonists would show us Jesus as the great Liberal. Some folks claim Jesus is the great American. Some see Jesus as anti-American. Some see Jesus as merely a fine teacher. Some see Jesus as a faith-healer. Some see Jesus as the ultimate psychiatric counselor. Some see Jesus as the ultimate social activist. Some see Jesus as Winner-take-all.

Isn't it astounding how often our image of Jesus turns out to look just like us. "We want to see Jesus," folks ask us, and we end up pointing them to ourselves.

But I tell you where I see Jesus these days. This is not the season of Christmas and infancy. This is the season of Lent. I tell you where I see Jesus these days.

I see Jesus every time I see someone point away from themselves. Every time I hear someone say, "Don't look at me. Look at her. Look at him," that is when I am seeing Jesus.

When I see someone give up their lesson plan for the sake of a child, I see Jesus. When I see someone give away their place in line. When I see a mother give her own food to a child. When I see a person give away his rights for the sake of another person's rights. When I see strangers risk their lives to shelter refugees.

When I see giving away, then I see Jesus. For it was Jesus who said, "the one who saves his life will lose it. The one who gives away his life, for my sake, finds it."

I suppose that, early on, Saint Peter had a hard time seeing the Jesus who would give away his control, give away his power, give away his life. That's why he tried to rebuke Jesus, only to have Jesus say, "Get behind me, Satan."

Jesus was saying that a true savior suffers, a true Lord gives things away, and a true person of greatness is not afraid to admit suffering and loss. Little children do not know things like that, are not supposed to know such suffering and loss. I learned that when I was teaching little children. But adults do come to realize those things, and to realize those things about God, too; "the one who saves her life will lose it. The one who gives away her life, for my sake, finds it."

As we walk the way of Christ in the next two weeks, we will see that very giving away. Most of us will not die on a cross like Jesus. Not many of us will literally give away our lives. But we can do something just as powerful, that shows people Jesus.

We can give. And we can for-give. We can forgive. We can let go.

Forgiveness is the Christian practice of losing one's life daily. Forgiveness is the practice of letting go, daily, letting go of the individual claims we make daily on our neighbors. We say, "You owe me that. I deserve this. You did me wrong. You are obligated to me."

Forgiveness releases other people of the claims we have on them. Forgiveness gives away those claims, gives away the bondage of our claims. A habit of forgiveness is the habit of relinquishing our own lesson plan for the sake of the greater image of Jesus.

Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Unless a grain of wheat falls in the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Jesus will give up his life in a few days. Palm Sunday. Good Friday. And from that position of sheer emptiness, he will say, "Father, forgive them." In that giving, in that forgiving, we shall see Jesus in all his glory.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Wherever there is giving, there is Jesus. Wherever there is forgiving, there is Jesus, our glorified Lord.

AMEN.

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