

Scripture Comments

John 12.20-33

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We wish to see Jesus

Cary Speaker, D.Min.

We begin with this wonderful passage from Jeremiah 31. Many of the Bible commentators observe that this is the only explicit Old Testament reference to the New Testament, that is, the new covenant. There are many covenants in the Hebrew Scripture (beginning with Adam and Eve, then Noah, Abraham and Sarah, etc., etc.). The new covenant of which Jeremiah speaks is a renewed commitment on God's part. This does not imply that the Torah is thrown out and forgotten. What distinguishes this new covenant is the gracious and forgiving word of God, who chooses to forget the sins of Israel. Just as Easter comes only through the death of Jesus, so too in Jeremiah's vision of the future the new covenant will come only through and beyond suffering. For Jeremiah and ancient Israel, this was the Babylonian Exile. The hopeful words of Jeremiah come from a time of crisis and transition. Jeremiah illustrates his hope for the future in chapter 32, when he buys a field. His spiritual vision of a new covenant is followed by a real estate transaction. As long as we are on this earth, even the people of the new covenant need a place to live, land to grow food and a market place where things can be bought and sold.

During the first eleven chapters of John, Jesus has said that his hour has not yet come. He says to his mother (2.4), "My hour has not yet come." When the Jerusalem leaders fail to arrest Jesus (7.30), we are told that "his hour had not yet come." Again (8.20), the narrator explains that Jesus could not be arrested because his hour "had not yet come." But here in 12.23, Jesus announces that the "hour" has now come. What has made the difference? Why now?

Go back to the story just preceding today's reading. It is the raising of Lazarus (11.45). Two clues are presented in the Lazarus story. Based on that miraculous event, many have come to believe in Jesus. The belief of the crowd brings about the opposition of the Pharisees and leaders of the Jewish community. "From that day on they planned to put him to death" (v. 53). We can conclude that at least one factor that leads Jesus to realize that his "hour" has come is the opposition to him. Along with the opposition is the response of the crowd. "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (12.19).

The story for today opens with an awkward scene describing Greeks who want to see Jesus. We can only speculate that these are Jewish proselytes in Jerusalem for Passover. They present themselves to Andrew and Philip, possibly because they are from the heavily Gentile-populated Galilee, and perhaps also because they have Greek names. There is some speculation that at the time John was written, Philip and Andrew were associated with missions to the Gentiles. What makes this awkward is the striking absence of any follow up. We do not know if they actually see Jesus, or even if they have come in faith. What makes them important is Jesus' comment in verse 23, "the hour has come." There is a connection between the "world" coming to Jesus, in the person of these Greeks, and his imminent death.

The Greeks are symbolic of the world seeking Jesus. Once these Greeks make their request, they disappear. Part of what it means for the "hour" to have come is that Jesus must now make

himself available to the world. He cannot do that in ministry geographically limited to Judea, Samaria and Galilee. This will be done through the risen and glorified Christ who abides in his word and through the Spirit with believers everywhere.

The “hour” arrives because opposition to Jesus reaches its inevitable outcome: the officials will seek his death. The “hour” also arrives because of Jesus’ very “success” with the world. But the world is fickle. Jesus’ popularity quickly fades and within the week is transformed into hostility. As John has warned us, the world is unreliable; neither its hostility nor its adoration can be trusted.

Jesus’ “hour” is a confrontation with the world. “Now is the judgment of this world” (12.31). The triumph over the “ruler of this world,” is joined with the claim that in Jesus’ “hour,” he lifts all persons to himself. There is more than a hint of universalism in this promise. Jesus anticipates the eventual overcoming of the world’s opposition and opens the door for hope that “all people” will indeed be drawn to him.

John’s congregation, hearing this Gospel story, is separated by time and space from the initial events of Jesus’ ministry. They needed to hear the word of presence and availability of Christ. They needed the reassurance that living in another place and time did not place them beyond the life-giving and saving work of Christ. We, too, need to hear that. We are not second-class disciples at a distance, born at the wrong time in the wrong place. Christ is here.

The Christ of this Gospel does not suffer agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. This Christ does not cry out in the anguished pain of abandonment on the cross. Rather, in John’s version of the Gospel, Jesus embraces God’s will and a voice from heaven confirms the decision (v. 28). Just as it was then, it still is. Not everyone heard the voice. Whatever troubling of the soul Jesus experienced in approaching his death, that struggle is now over. From this point on, the passion story in John will be without anguish and tears.

References:

- Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.
Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.