“Seeing and Believing”

“They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’"

“Seeing is believing” – or is it? We live in a world where what we see isn’t always as reliable as it might have been in the past. With the dawning of Photoshop and other computer programs, images can be manipulated to the point where they bear little or no resemblance to the actual event. Persons and places can be added or deleted at the creator’s whim, which makes the accuracy and reliability of the finished product suspicious. A picture may still be worth a thousand words – but can we trust that any of those words are true?

In today’s Gospel lesson, a group of Greeks arrive at the Passover festival and make a request of Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (John 12:21). These “Greeks” (Hellenes) are to be distinguished from Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenistai, identified as “Hellenists” in Acts 6:1). Because they have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, they may be Gentile proselytes (converts to Judaism), but in the Fourth Gospel their presence underscores the fact that they are non-Jews, representatives of the Gentile world, who have come to see Jesus. Their request confirms the unconscious prophecy of the Pharisees in 12:19: “Look, the world has gone after him!”

The Greeks’ request is to “see” Jesus, a conventional way to request a meeting (“Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, waiting to see you.” – Luke 8:20), can also be read as a desire to become disciples (“Come and see.” – John 1:39). Because Andrew and Philip were the first to receive the invitation to discipleship directly from Jesus (“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’” – 1:43), their presence here establishes a connection between the call of the first Jewish disciples and the arrival of the first Gentile disciples. Jesus had said that he would lay down his life on behalf of others and that there will be others who he will gather as his disciples:

- “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” – John 10:16.

The appearance of Gentiles wishing to “see” (“believe in”) Jesus indicates that it is time for him as the Good Shepherd to “lay down his life for the sheep.” (10:11).

The arrival of these Gentiles marks the beginning of a new section in John’s Gospel. Instead of responding directly to their request to “see” him, Jesus declares that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (12:23). Just as the raising of Lazarus and Jesus’ anointing of Mary both prefigured Jesus’ glorification (“She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.” – 12:7), so also does the arrival of the Greeks. It serves as a foretaste of the church’s future mission to the Gentiles and the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s promises, pointing to the fulfillment of salvation for all people (... we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.” – 4:42). It will be through Jesus’ “hour” – his death and resurrection, his return to God – that God’s promises for God’s people are fulfilled.

Jesus introduces the first set of teachings about his death with a brief agricultural parable: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (12:24). In the Fourth Gospel, “fruit” is Jesus’ metaphor for the life of the community of faith (“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” – 15:5). One comes to Jesus through his death, as Paul teaches in his letter to the Romans:

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.
Jesus follows his parable with a saying that many have found disturbing: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (12:25). “Hatred” (miseo) does not mean a psychological hatred of oneself or others, but a total commitment that gives absolute priority to Jesus. The need to hate one’s life in this world in order to live continues the theme of the parable on the need for dying in order to live and bear fruit. As Jesus had to die in order to bring life to others, “the follower of Jesus cannot escape death any more than his master but must pass through death to his own eternal life.” (Raymond Brown). To love one’s life is the opposite of Jesus’ own action; it places one outside the community shaped by Jesus’ gift of his life (psyche) and leads to the loss of that life. Loving one’s life in “this world” places one in the position that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:19). To “hate” one’s life in this world is to renounce allegiance to anything that would draw us from God, the renunciations we make when we confess our faith at the waters of Holy Baptism:

- “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?”
- “Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?”
- “Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?”

In making such renunciations, we declare our allegiance to Jesus (“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord”) and to receive his gift of eternal life (“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.” – 3:16). Since Jesus’ ultimate service is the gift of his life in love, his disciples are called to love as he loves and to serve as he serves:

- “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” – Mark 8:34-35.

The focus returns to the “hour” that is awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” (12:27). The words of agony that Jesus speaks are an allusion to Psalm 42:5, which affirms the psalmist’s trust in God even in the midst of agony and distress:

- “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

By evoking this psalm, Jesus affirms that he trusts in God even as the hour of his suffering and death approach, a trust that he will confirm in his prayer at Gethsemane: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mark 14:36). Jesus recognizes that the “hour” is the ultimate purpose of his ministry; it is the final revelation of his relationship with God. It is with this recognition that Jesus ends his address with the prayer petition “Father, glorify your name” (12:28), which is the Fourth Gospel’s version of the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Hallowed be thy name.” As Jesus prayed at Gethsemane that God’s Will be done, so also here does pray that God’s plan be carried out through his “hour.” The name that the Father has entrusted to Jesus (“While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me.” – 17:12) can only be glorified when its bearer – Jesus – is glorified through death, resurrection, and ascension. Only then will people come to realize what the divine name “I am” means when applied to Jesus; “it is not a request for people to praise God’s name, but a request for God to sanctify God’s own name.” (Brown).

- “It is true that God’s name is holy in itself, but we ask in this prayer that it may also become holy in and among us.” – Small Catechism.

As soon as Jesus finishes speaking, a voice from heaven declares “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” In other Gospels, the voice from heaven is a means through which Jesus’ true identity is revealed:

- “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” – Matthew 3:17.
As might be expected, there is a great deal of confusion among the crowd who also hears this heavenly voice: “The crowd standing there heard it and thought that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’” (12:29). The crowd’s hearing the voice of God as either thunder or an angel’s voice suggests that the crowd recognized that they were witnesses to an epiphany, even if they did not understand what was happening. It is a voice that “has come for your sake, not for mine,” a voice of revelation that announces that “now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” (12:31). While at one time “the whole world [was] under the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19), Jesus’ “hour” means that the Evil One has lost his authority over the world; for Christ has freed us “from sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.” (Small Catechism). Because the forces of darkness and death no longer have control over God’s people, we can lift our voices in proclaiming “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

The positive effect of Jesus’ hour highlights the universal offer of salvation available in Jesus: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (12:32). The Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to be good news for all people; our Lord’s final words to his apostles are that “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). But while the offer of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are available to all persons, a person still has the free will to decide whether to accept or reject his gift; it is the people’s response to this offer that sets limits, not Jesus himself:

“I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak.” – 12:46-49.

Jesus’ teaching is summed up by the Evangelist: “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” (12:33). Jesus is “lifted up” on the Cross so that the very instrument that was meant for death might be transformed into the means through which we have life everlasting. When we survey the wondrous cross, we no longer see a Roman tool of capital punishment; we see the means through which Christ took on and destroyed the power of death, so that when he is “lifted up” from the tomb on Easter morning we might also have the assurance that we too will rise to newness of life: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” (1 Corinthians 15:20). If we truly want to “see” Jesus – to come into his presence and become his disciples – then we need to see the one who was crucified and died for our sake, as difficult as that may be for those who prefer the victory without understanding the means through which that victory was achieved.

“The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is not longer afraid of death. In his time the crucified Christ was regarded as a scandal and as foolishness. Today, too, it is considered old-fashioned to put him in the centre of Christian faith and of theology. Yet only when men are reminded of him, however untimely this may be, can they be set free from the power of the facts of the present time, and from the laws and compulsions of history, and be offered a future which will never grow dark again.” – Jurgen Moltmann, The Crucified God.

During my years in Niagara Falls, I visited the local Presbyterian church and noticed that on the pulpit were engraved the very words that the Greeks asked of the disciples: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” When I asked by colleague about this, he explained that it is meant as a reminder to the preacher (who now, of course, is not only a “sir”) that people who come to worship have the same desire as those Greeks: to come into Christ’s presence, to hear the word of hope that comes to us through our proclamation of the cross and resurrection of Christ. It is a reminder to preachers – and to all of the church – that our central mission and purpose is to proclaim the good news to a world that now more than ever needs to hear this word of hope that is ours in Christ who has died, Christ who is risen, and Christ who will come again.
We are, now more than ever, called to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, so that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9).

· “The church is the bearer to all nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, all nations, and all human lives. It is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God’s kingdom ... The privilege of the Christian life cannot be sought apart from its responsibilities.” – Lesslie Newbigin.

For many years, Dr. Harold Albert taught preaching (homiletics) at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Dr. Albert had retired before I took the course, but one day he was our guest lecturer and delivered an address that I will never forget. He looked each of us in the eyes and declared that “no one comes to church because they want to hear your opinions from the pulpit. Preach the Cross!” When all of us come to worship – both long-time worshipers and those who are in our assembly for the first time – they, like those Greeks who approach the disciples, “wish to see Jesus,” desire to come into our Lord’s presence and to hear the Gospel message proclaimed today as it was in those days. Our mission as a Church is to proclaim this Gospel, but we must make certain that what we are proclaiming truly is the message of the Cross and not a message that conforms to our own likings or speaks a word that we want to speak or to hear. As St. Paul teaches the church of every generation, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God ... For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24; 2:2).

· “Jesus must therefore make it clear beyond all doubt that the “must’ of suffering applies to his disciples no less than to himself. Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion. Discipleship means adherence to the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the cross.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship.

For all who come into our Lord’s presence whenever and wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, seeing is believing; for in Christ, we see the fullness of God revealed, the good news of our liberation present among us through the Gospel of Christ’ death and resurrection. When we see our crucified and risen Lord, we are called to believe, to trust, and to follow him as faithful disciples. The Cross of Christ may not be what we expect to see or what we may want to see, but it is in that very Cross that we have the sure and certain hope that “Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Romans 6:9) – and neither will death have the final word over all whose hope is in our crucified and risen Lord! Amen.