

Sermon for Passion Sunday – Bishop Karen

John 12: 20 - 33

A Chinese Lord was pleased with his fine garden. He was delighted with its towering bamboo tree. Every time he passed it by the bamboo would sway and bow down low in homage.

One day the Lord spoke to the tree: "Bamboo, I have a favour to ask of you." The bamboo bowed even lower: "I am your servant. I will do whatever you ask." And the Lord asked it to surrender its branches and leaves - "they are shading too much of the sunlight from my other shrubs and flowers." "But Master, if you cut them away I shall not be so grand, and I will not be able to offer you such homage." "You must trust me," declared the Lord. and the bamboo consented.

A few days later, the Lord stopped again before the tree: "Bamboo, I have another favour to ask of you. I want you to surrender your coat of bark. It will make excellent gutters for water to reach my other shrub and flowers." "But master, if you take it away I shall not be so strong, and I will not be able to offer you such homage." "You must trust me," declared the Lord. And the bamboo consented.

A few days later, the Lord stopped again before the tree: "Bamboo, I have a final favour to ask of you. Let me cut you down very low, then there will be more nourishment of the soil available for my other shrubs and flowers." "But master, if you cut me I shall not be so tall, and I will not be able to offer you such homage." "You must trust me," declared the Lord. And the bamboo consented.

Some weeks later, the Lord stood before the small bamboo. "Thank you, my trusting bamboo," he said. "All my other shrubs and flowers are thriving because of your dedication. You have paid me your greatest homage. And I notice new buds shooting from you already."

Our Gospel today opens with some Greeks who had come up to Jerusalem to worship. Philip brings them to Andrew and he brings them to Jesus. Jesus brings them right away into the heart of paradox and into the heart of truth.

"Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies it remains alone: but if it dies it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life destroys it, and whoever despises his life in this world keeps it for everlasting life."

The Greeks were widely known as great seekers of the truth, so in their quest for the truth, the Greeks come seeking Jesus. The Greeks are taught the paradoxical wisdom of the Gospel - which is also enshrined in the Chinese story with which I began.

Jesus teaches us the lesson of dying to ourselves. He had predicted his passion, death and resurrection to his apostles at least three times, but they had not understood. "How could one conquer by dying?", they thought. Jesus showed them a principle of the spiritual life: only dying to ourselves brings forth a harvest of fruit. We find that hard to believe, much harder to live. But it is what Jesus did in letting himself be crucified for us on the cross: for in his dying to himself, redemption was won for all humankind.

Christ is an example of his own message. "When I am lifted up from the earth - on the cross - I shall draw all things to myself." From a human point of view he was a total failure. Everything he started seemed to collapse. His disciples betrayed or abandoned him. He was executed as a criminal. Yet, he was the one who rose from the dead, ascended and continues to reign.

But there is another message in the gospel for us. The question could be asked: are we seeking Jesus? And if we are, where do we find him? The answer, of course, is that we find him in one another. Sometimes it is not easy to see Christ in others but see him we must. Believing that there is a piece of God in each one of us. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we all saw God's glory inside each one of us, instead of the weak humanity with which that glory has been clothed?

The following story speaks to this very point.

Michael rises every morning at 4 am, in good and bad weather, workday or holiday, and walks into his kitchen. In it are the makings of his famous sandwiches, famous at least to those who desperately need them to stave off hunger for the day. By 5.50 am, he's making the rounds of the makeshift homeless shelters in New York. In a short time, he gives out 200 sandwiches to as many homeless people as he can, before beginning his work day in the courthouse.

It started 20 years ago with a cup of coffee and a roll for a homeless man named John. Day after day, Michael brought John sandwiches, tea, clothes, and when it was really cold, a resting place in his car while he worked. In the beginning, Michael just wanted to do a good deed. But one day a voice in his head compelled him to do more. On this cold, winter morning, he asked John if he would like to get cleaned up. It was an empty offer, because Michael was sure John would refuse. Unexpectedly, John said, "Are you going to wash me?"

Michael heard an inner voice say, "Put your money where your mouth is." Looking at this poor man, covered in ragged and smelly clothes, unkempt, hairy and wild-looking, Michael was afraid. But he also knew that he was looking at a big test of his commitment. So he helped John upstairs to the wash room of the courthouse to begin the work.

John's body was a mass of cuts and sores, the result of years of pain and neglect. Michael pushed through his own fears and revulsion. He helped John wash, cut his hair, shaved him and shared breakfast with him. "It was at that moment," Michael remembers, "that I knew I had a calling, and I believed that I had it within me to do anything. There are days when it's difficult leaving my warm bed and the comfort of my family to go out with sandwiches. But then that voice in me starts speaking, and I have to get up."

Michael has made 200 sandwiches every day for the past 20 years. "When I give out sandwiches," Michael explains, "I don't simply lay them on a table for people to pick up. I look everyone in the eye, shake their hands, and I offer them my wishes for a good and hopeful day. Each person is important to me."

I don't see them as 'the homeless', but as people who need food, an encouraging smile and some positive human contact.

Serving God does take commitment, often when we least feel like being committed. It means dying to one's self, putting our own needs aside for the sake of the gospel.

Albert Schweitzer, who gave up a prominent theological teaching position to found a mission in Africa concluded his book 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus' with this beautiful poem about our search for Jesus.

"He comes to us as one unknown without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in this fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He Is."

As we approach the most sacred week in the Church's liturgical year, we need to ask ourselves the questions "who is Jesus for us?" and what is God calling us to do for them?

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