

The life of God

CRACKED WIDE OPEN

Diocesan Lent Course 2021

in the paschal mystery

The suffering, death, resurrection
and glorification of Jesus

Diocese of Chichester Lent Course 2021

Week Five
Bible Notes

The Gospel for the 5th Sunday of Lent:

Jesus lifted up on the Cross

(John 12.20-33)



John 12.20-33

'20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 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.

25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. 27 "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. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people (things) to myself." 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.'

Bible Study Notes

We stand this Sunday nearer to the heart of the Christian Year - Christ's death and resurrection - the celebration of which will begin next week, with Palm Sunday. The Gospel passage therefore directs our attention to the cross, recalling last week's image of Jesus lifted on high just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness for the healing of the Hebrews. However Jesus raised up on the cross will heal not one but every nation.

There is much to learn from this passage. We are shown from the outset how evangelism and discipleship work. The 'Greeks' mentioned (perhaps representing non-Jews) have obviously heard of Jesus but they needed the disciples, Philip and Andrew, to bring them to him in person. Jesus knows that their arrival indicates that his hour has also arrived, when he will die to gather into one not just the Jews but, '...the dispersed children of God (John 11.52).'

Whereas in the other gospels, Jesus uses the image of a grain of wheat to represent God's Kingdom, here in John's account, he uses it to refer to himself – he is the Kingdom of God, come in person. But he will not come definitively until he has died and risen, to destroy sin and death, and gain for us the Holy Spirit.

He asks for total commitment from us, (hating our lives is rhetorical hyperbole to stress a point) just as he laid down his life for all. That may not mean actual death (though there are many Christians throughout the world for whom it might), but it does mean dying to sin (egoism and selfishness) and living with love for others. As servants of Jesus, we cannot expect to be anywhere else than where he is: the cross.

The dialogue with the Father depicted here is John's more condensed version of the agony in the garden, when Jesus wrestled with his Father's will, in great distress. But there is no serious question of turning back: he has not come so far to take his hand off the plough and look back (c.f. Luke 9.62)! So it was with Jesus - his life always matched his teaching.

The passage reaches a climax as he indicates the kind of death he will die, lifted up on the cross. This verse interprets all that has gone before, indeed John's Gospel as a whole, as well as the coming celebration of Easter. Christ crucified – in a gospel famous for its many 'signs' – is himself the great sign.

At his birth the angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem where they would see a sign – a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2.12); and at his presentation in the Temple, Simeon prophesied that Jesus was a

a sign that would be rejected (Luke 2. 34-35). The rejection is about to happen, on Golgotha. But it will also be the time of triumph, when God will destroy sin and death through the death of his Son, by raising him to new life. That victory will abolish forever the power of the devil, who will cease to be the 'ruler of this world.' It will be the great hour of judgement, the division between those who receive and those who reject this sign of God's unconditional, unlimited love.

The Magnetic Pull of the

Cross

Perhaps the greatest miracle worked by Christ is that he turned a hideous instrument of torture into a symbol of redeeming love. Notwithstanding its ugliness the cross – itself redeemed by the one who hung there – has now acquired a magnetic power, a force of attraction of its own. Jesus crucified is not simply an image from the past. He is a living reality that calls us to himself. As the Church's greatest saints have always known, the cross is the litmus test of the reality of our faith. We should use it to judge the worth of all so-called 'spiritualities' and 'world-views' that abound in society today. Do they, like the Gospel of Christ, speak of self-sacrificing love (given us in him), which we are called to emulate – or are they simply refined forms of

egoism - putting self-development in place of self-giving and promising 'spiritual experiences' instead of the dark night of faith and reliance on God's will and Word? Jesus' cross invites us to make that judgement of our own hearts.

The Centrality of the Cross

The cross must stand at the centre of our prayer, both communal and personal:

- Communal because in all our worship – and especially the celebration of the Lord's Supper – we commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus, and not merely as a bare act of recall. In the power of the Holy Spirit the risen Lord becomes present among us in word and sacrament. All Christian worship is focused on, flows from, and flows back into the cross of Jesus.
- Personal because in 'private prayer' (which for a Christian is never really private!) we rededicate ourselves, re-conforming our lives to Christ crucified and risen. In the praying of the Daily Offices we recall in the morning his resurrection; in the evening we offer ourselves afresh with him, like an evening sacrifice, to the Father; in Compline/Night Prayer we commend ourselves into his hands like Jesus on the cross - ready to awake and rise for his

service once more when day dawns.

Christians are called to be cross-bearers. Gathered around the cross, gazing on it in wonder and love, we draw from it the word of life (Philippians 2. 16), with its power to transform individual, societies and cultures. We can only do that by gazing regularly on the cross of Jesus, lifting it high in our hearts and allowing it to draw us into his radiance (Psalm 36. 9; Psalm 34. 5). Then, bearing that light courageously, he sends us out in the power of the Spirit to live and work to his praise and glory.



Study Questions

- What does it mean for a Christian that life comes through death?
- How can we make the death and resurrection of Christ more central to our worship – through more frequent celebrations of Holy Communion or perhaps greater attention to Holy Week?

- What place does contemplation of the cross of Christ play in my personal prayer life?
- What would a community, a society, and a culture transformed by the cross of Jesus really look like?

Collects for the 5th

Sunday of Lent

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Gracious Father, you gave up your Son out of love for the world: lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion, that we may know eternal peace through the shedding of our Saviour's blood, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have taught us that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do also for you: give us the will to be the servant of others as you were the servant of all, and gave up your life and died for us, but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen.

