

WE WOULD SEE JESUS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 2, 2006

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

In the *Times* this week,¹ in the Arts section of all places, although it might have been in the Style section for all that it mattered, there was a story about Joel Osteen, the most successful of the current crop of Texas prosperity preachers. His latest book has sold 3,000,000 copies, not quite the level of **The DaVinci Code** but you writers out there know that you could live pretty well on 15% of 3,000,000 copies. Osteen's deal on his new book will bring him an estimated \$13,000,000.

Now it's easy to take pot shots at these mega star preachers, and their expensive homes and grand lifestyles, whose hair styling bills and makeup expenses alone are more than most of us mainline preachers earn in a year. I'm sure these entrepreneurial pastors cum television stars do some good and certainly they inspire a lot of people.

If you saw the article on Osteen, you noticed, perhaps, as I did, the picture of Varunee Rinehart and her 17 year old daughter Whitney meeting Mr. Osteen at coffee hour. Whitney and her mother had driven 15 hours to Houston from their home in Brunswick, Georgia to tell Mr. Osteen of a healing that Whitney had experienced. A tumor in her head is gone and she is now cancer free. It's quite a story, but what I remember most is the picture of Whitney and Varunee standing with Osteen.

Whitney looks like a teenager who has just touched the hem of Brad Pitt's robe, or Tom Cruise, or Antonio Banderas. She is swooning, giddy with excitement, and admittedly Osteen has a model's good looks. I suspect Whitney will never wash her right hand again, the hand that has touched Osteen's shoulder.

Now I wonder, was it like that for Jesus? Did anyone swoon over him other than perhaps Mary Magdalene? Did anybody travel any long distances to come and tell him about a tumor disappearing in the head, or to steal a kiss, or to get his autograph? We know that there was a woman with a hemorrhage who decided that if she could just touch the hem of Jesus' robe, she would be healed. And she did, and she was.

And then there is this story today from John's gospel about some Greeks who were in town for the Passover, Hellenistic Jews from the Diaspora no doubt, who asked to see Jesus. They found Philip instead who went to Andrew to tell him what the Greeks had asked, and together Philip and Andrew went to tell Jesus. I'm not sure in the shuffle whether the Greeks ever got to see Jesus. John doesn't tell us. But we do know that when Jesus heard about the Greeks asking to see him, Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." A page turned, and from that moment on he began to speak of his death.

John, the gospel writer, describes Jesus' crucifixion as his *glorification*, a marvelous spin on an otherwise horrible end. It is no surprise, then that the entire passion narrative in John's gospel has been described as the Book of Glory. "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified," Jesus said when the Greeks came looking for him.

Now if you feel a little left out, as if there's something more happening here than meets the eye or ear, there's good reason. Just before the story about the Greeks coming to town there is another story which tells us what we don't know. It's a story that really belongs to next Sunday, to Palm Sunday. Jesus has just come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and the crowds have welcomed him shouting "Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel."

The Pharisees who watched this unseemly exuberance were disgusted with the crowd and with those who turned out for the parade. The Pharisees, seeing that they were losing the battle for the hearts and minds of their own people said, "Look at these fools. You can't do anything with them. The whole world has gone after him."

And under John's masterful editorial hand, what is the next thing that happens? The world goes after him. The Greeks come looking for him.

And it's the coming of those Greeks, the Hellenists, that sets things in motion according to John. It's the world seeking after him that lights the fuse that will soon explode, the last straw that will lead to his arrest and crucifixion.

"Sir, we would like to see Jesus," the Greeks said to Philip, and of course wouldn't we all like to see him? Never mind Joel Osteen, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

I remember preaching at the Stony Brook School some years ago. Barbara Sherman's father, Robert Sinclair Swanson, Jr., was chair of the board there once upon a time. Billy Graham's children have attended there. It is a venerable pulpit.

As I stood there for the first time, I noticed that, carved into the wood of that pulpit, were the words from today's lesson, the request of the Greeks recast in impeccable King James English, "Sir, we would see Jesus." I have seen that phrase carved into a number of pulpits around the country, and it is always a good reminder to the occupant *pro tem* why it is that anyone would step into a pulpit, and what one's purpose week after week must be, to show God's people Jesus, the one who best shows us the love of God made manifest among us.

It is not an easy task. But for the honor of the thing, you might otherwise be just as happy sitting in the pew, except that as Paul says, "How are they to believe in one of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"¹

Last Saturday I spent the day at the presbytery meeting at St. Albans Presbyterian Church in Queens. It's not the end of the earth, but you can see it from there. You take the E train to the end of the line, and then catch a bus to take you even farther. And you get off the bus on the corner of a quiet neighborhood that reminds you of the 1950's. The bus roars away in a cloud of diesel smoke leaving you feeling like some visitor to the Twilight Zone. In the distance the bus disappears in the direction of Long Island, never to be heard from again. Our presbytery hosts were friendly and welcoming. St. Albans is an African American and Caribbean church these days, originally settled by European immigrants.

¹ Romans 10:14-15

I sat in this thriving Black church and looked around at the beautiful stained glass windows in the sanctuary. They must have been installed in the church during the European period, because all the likenesses of Jesus, *Jesus with the children*, *Jesus praying in Gethsemane*, *Jesus healing the leper* all bore the face of a white Jesus. And I wondered whether the congregation that gathered there each week hoping to see something of the compassion and beauty of the Lord, saw only a white man Jesus, or whether they saw him as the darker Semitic man that he was. Sir, we would like to see Jesus. And I wonder how any of us envisions him.

A few years ago Frederick Buechner wrote the text for a photographic book entitled **The Faces of Jesus**. The faces depicted were really quite remarkable, portrayed by artists in stone and marble, oil and watercolor. There were the faces of an African Jesus, a Japanese Jesus, an Italian Renaissance Jesus, a Polynesian Jesus. There were the faces of an angry Jesus, a compassionate Jesus, a suffering Jesus, a loving Jesus.

About these visages, Buechner wrote:

To say he had a face is to say that like the rest of us he had many faces as the writers of the Old Testament knew who used the Hebrew word almost exclusively in its plural form. To their way of thinking, the face of man is not a front for him to live his life behind but a frontier, the outermost, visible edge of his life itself in all its richness and multiplicity, and hence they spoke not of the face of a man or of God, but of his faces.²

Of course, it's not so much the face of Jesus that those Greeks wanted to see, but the man inside, the one about whom they had heard, whatever they had heard. It is what any of us wants of another, to reveal something of the true self, the inner being for which the face is only the exterior. Our true face is more than our bearing, the way we raise an eyebrow, or squint our eyes, or part our hair. It is the interior person we want to see, the soul of the person.

These visitors from the Greek Diaspora wanted to see Jesus, wanted to know him and what made him different from others. They wanted to know how it was that he taught "as one with authority and not as the scribes and Pharisees," as Mark and Luke tell us he did.

And of course, if you read the gospels you do see his face, the true man inside, in all its complexity, the man who out-lived and out-loved us all. The one who had compassion on the poor, who stood a child in the midst of the people and said you must become like this little one to enter the kingdom of heaven. Gentle and kind, he was. But he was also a wild man, his hair matted, chest heaving, eyes flashing, who drove the moneychangers from the temple, and shouted at the scribes and Pharisees, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" To see him was to see his many faces.

Garry Wills in his new book, **What Jesus Meant**, describes the complexity of the man we long to see:

According to the gospels, he preferred the company of the lowly, and despised that of the rich and powerful. He crossed lines of ritual purity to deal with the unclean – with lepers, the possessed, the insane, with prostitutes and adulterers and collaborators with Rome. He was called a

bastard (Jn 8:41) and was rejected by his own brothers (Jn 7:3-5) and the rest of his family (Mk 3:21). He was an outcast among outcasts, sharing the lot of the destitute, the defiled, the despised...

He had a lower class upbringing, as a cabinetmaker's son. That was a trade usually marginal and itinerant in his time. He chose his followers from among the lower class, from fishermen... or from a despised trade (tax collection for the Romans). There were no Scribes or scholars of the Law in his following. [He] not only favored the homeless. He was himself homeless, born homeless and living homeless during his public life... He depended on others to shelter him. He especially depended on women, who were "second class citizens" in his culture. He was not a philosopher. He wrote nothing for his followers in a later age. He depended on his uneducated followers to express what he meant... His very presence was subversive.³

"Sir, we would like to see Jesus," the Greeks asked of Philip. And I wonder if they really knew what they asked, and whether they would be disillusioned by what they might see.

Two things we know about their request. One is that there is no record that they actually got to meet Jesus face to face. The other is that their asking to see him set off a chain reaction that led to the cross. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus said. And you can almost hear the hour tolling in the background.

Maybe the world really was going after him at that point, just like the Pharisees said, but it would be short lived. In a very brief time, the high riding Jesus who came to Jerusalem amid the accolades of the crowds shouting, "Hosanna, in the highest," would find the shouts of welcome had morphed into cries to "Crucify!" And then they would see Jesus indeed.

Pilate would show them Jesus from his balcony, nearly naked, a plait of thorns biting into his brow, blood dripping from his scourged back, tears welling in his eyes. *Want to see him now?* "Here he is, your king of the Jews."

Given the choice between him and Barabbas, the crowd chose Barabbas. *Want to see him now?*

They would take him out to a hill and nail his hands and feet to the crossbeams. They would lift him up, stuck to the wood, and sink his cross into a hole in the ground. And there the world would see him at his most visible and most vulnerable. The poured out life and love of our Lord. The farthest extreme of God's willingness to know the human experience of sin and of death. The savior of the world, abandoned by his disciples the night of his arrest, betrayed and delivered into the hands of his enemies. Hosanna in the highest! *Want to see him now?*

Sir, we wish to see Jesus. And if you would see him, you must see him not only as the winsome, handsome young man of Galilee, the kind and gentle Jesus who gathered the children in his arms and gave sight to the blind, but also as the Jesus who confronted the scribes and Pharisees, the one who had no form or comeliness that we should desire him, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. You have to see him walking by the

Sea of Galilee calling disciples, yes, but also as the broken man nailed in agony to a cross taking upon him the suffering of the world. *Want to see him now?*

I was naked and you clothed me, he said. I was sick and you visited me. Alone and you came to me. Imprisoned and you visited me. Hungry and you gave me food. Thirsty, and you gave me drink. And if that's the measure of it, every one of us has seen him already today his nose pressed to the restaurant window, dozing on the subway car, on the front page of the *Times* and on the evening news, a soldier far from home unsure of what it is he fights for anymore, the grieving Sunni child whose parents have been killed by a Shiite bomber, crying out "Why?"

Sir, we would like to see Jesus. And so would we all. If not with our eyes, at least with our hearts. To know the man who has taken our suffering as his, and made us his own.

In the latter part of these forty days of Lent we gather today at this table for nourishment, for strength, for courage to see this all the way through. To follow Jesus into the city, to shout "Hosanna!" with those who welcomed him, to sit with him at table and hear that one of us will betray him, to follow him to the garden that night and then to the trial and on to the cross, and at last to the tomb, where we will see him again one fine day, and not as a stranger.

There we will see him as the one with whom we have sat at table innumerable times before and broken bread, and taken wine, he the host of this table made manifest among us the suffering of the world and in the breaking of bread.

Sir, we would like to see Jesus.

Friend, look to the world and look to the table, you will find him there.

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¹ Thursday, March 30, 2006.

² Frederick Buechner, **The Faces of Jesus**. New York/San Francisco: Stearn/Harper & Row, 1989) 10.

³ Garry Wills, **What Jesus Meant**. New York: Viking, 2006. xviii-xix