

## JESUS AND THE GREEKS

*Among those at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip and said to him, 'Sir, we should like to see Jesus.'*

This episode is a typical Johannine piece which in which the two parts of the conversation never quite seem to meet! The Greeks may have been converts to Judaism or, more probably, enquirers. They want to talk to Jesus – maybe to find out whether Judaism, which they are thinking of embracing, is really all that it is cracked up to be. They go to Philip, one of the apostles with a Greek name. He seems a bit unsure about approaching Jesus, so he in turn asks Andrew, who also has a Greek name. Andrew has no hesitation, and they go off to find Jesus.

The Greeks do not just want to look at Jesus, they want to talk to him. We say, 'Can I see you?', when we want to talk to someone. 'Seeing' imports the idea of a conversation. The Greeks are searching; they want to see what Jesus has to say face-to-face before deciding whether they can believe in him. John leaves it unclear whether they had their conversation with Jesus – he says that only Philip and Andrew spoke to him. Jesus responds by pointing to what he has to do – to die – and adds that those who wish to follow him must take the same path: 'The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; where I am my servant will be.' In other words, if you want to see me you must do as I do; then not only will you see me, you will be in fellowship with me.

It is the same idea as that in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. At the Last Judgement the people will be separated into two groups as a shepherd separates his flock into the sheep and the goats. The sheep are welcomed

into the kingdom because they have served the poor and the outcast. In serving them they have served Jesus. The point is clear: Jesus is served, and thus seen, in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned. This service may well call for deep personal sacrifice.

To make his meaning plain, Jesus uses the image of the seed. A seed cannot remain a seed if it is to perform its intended function of bringing forth new life. It must die; it must give up the life that is in it before it can bear a rich harvest. In the parable of the Sower Jesus spoke about the seed which fell in good soil and brought forth thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundred-fold; here he says what must happen to the seed before it yields its harvest: it must die.

It is possible that the Greeks did have had their conversation with Jesus because his reply is designed to make sense to them. The image of the seed was familiar to the Greeks. The law of life through death was accepted as a natural fact, and was used in the Greek Mysteries as a ground of hope for a future life. Jesus takes this idea and gives it an added spiritual depth. The Greeks had not seen the link between the dying seed and self-sacrifice. The Greeks saw self-sacrifice as something that might be necessary, and those who were capable of it were praiseworthy, but its moral value was not perceived. Although the Greeks had a highly developed sense of justice, they had not gone beyond justice and affirmed that love was the supreme good; and they had not seen that self-sacrifice, the highest expression of love, is the highest form of action. Jesus tells the Greeks that sacrificial love is the life of heaven.

But Jesus is not talking about philosophy; he is talking about reality, a reality which he must undergo; and the agony of that reality now seizes him: 'Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father glorify thy name.' John does not recount the agony in the garden, but the same anguish is here: 'now my soul is in turmoil'. Jesus is the seed which must die before it can bear a rich harvest. While John makes plain that Jesus is in control of events,

and that he accepts his imminent death, it is clear that his obedience is a soul-shaking sacrifice.

If the Greeks do put their faith in him, Jesus is telling them something important about discipleship. Those who truly follow him, who lose their lives for his sake, can expect their souls to be shaken too. Christians often fail to make this connection when trials of faith come. 'Why did this happen to me?' we ask. The answer is that it happened to you because it happened to him. Anyone who sets themselves 'to fight against evil and follow Christ', as it says in the Baptism Service, are deluding themselves if they expect a quiet life. Whenever we fight for the good or the truth we can expect opposition from the forces of evil.

Some years ago now I spent a retreat at the monastery at Crawley Down. One of my fellow retreatants told me that the monks often experienced spiritual violence, and that one of them had found himself thrown out of bed one night. A major part of their vocation was to do spiritual battle with the forces of evil; those forces are real and they fight back! There was a time in the Richmond Deanery in Surrey when most of the clergy were feeling very tired and dispirited. It was in the midst of the very materialist period in the 1980s, when the church was trying to say there was an alternative to the policies then being pursued. The evil forces released by those policies were fighting back, and we were being attacked. Christians who oppose the spirit of the age can expect a tough time. Dom Helder Camara, the former Archbishop of Recife in Brazil, said when I feed the poor they call me a saint, when I ask why they are poor they call me a communist. Today, the church has had little public thanks for its insistence that there is a higher authority than the self; it is regularly derided in the press, some of the 'cover' being simply offensive. It is easy to be discouraged. But the church's witness can be effective as the campaign to remit the unpayable debts of the poorest nations shows; even so progress is slow, and the campaign continues to attract opposition. True discipleship is a soul-shaking experience.

The voice from heaven says that Jesus will be glorified. This is John's way of speaking of Jesus' death; it will be his glorification, the crowning of all that he came to do. Death as glory is a hard image, but it is central to John's Gospel. The Temple will not become a house of prayer for all nations simply by removing the Jewish bits like the special money and the animal sacrifices: it requires a new beginning, a death and resurrection of the old into the new. This is exactly what is about to happen on Good Friday, says St John, and it will be glorious.

Much of this was lost on the Jews – and probably on the Greeks too! Maybe it is lost on us as well. All of us, Jews, Greeks, Christians, are reluctant, unable even, to let go of our basic ideas. The Jews don't want to let go of their idea of the Messiah: 'Our law teaches that the Messiah continues for ever. What do you mean by saying the Son of Man must be lifted up? What Son of Man is this?' Our religious ideas are often the most resistant to change. Jesus may have performed mighty miracles, but even so the people are unwilling to let what they have seen and heard change their minds. This is no more than John has made plain at the outset of his Gospel: 'He came to his own, and his own received him not.' So Jesus went away from them into hiding, not to escape, but to ensure that the time of his death and the harvest which it will bring is the time of God's choosing. His hour was upon him.