

## Wishing to See Jesus

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 21, 2021  
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.*

*"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." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. (John 12:20-33, NRSV)*

Well, first, let me say, I hope you all had a Happy St Patrick's Day! We certainly did around here with all the preschool kids and teachers in green! As I indicated in my message last Sunday, I've always loved the day – the *inclusivity* of it. It's not just a day for those of us of Irish heritage. *Everyone* is welcome to don the green and be Irish on St Patrick's Day! And as we saw, this inclusivity is not accidental – it reflects the spirit of the day's namesake, that great Apostle of Ireland.

And now today, in this Sunday's preaching text, we see the inclusive spirit of *Jesus* spreading like wildfire in the days of his early ministry ... so much, in fact, that his message is attracting the attention of those beyond the Jewish community. Some Greeks approach Jesus' disciples and ask to see Jesus. We're not told anything about them or what exactly it is about Jesus that draws them in, but they are compelled to see him and learn more.

But just as we're not told anything more about their background or motivation, we're also never told if they got what they came for. The gospel writer shows a remarkable lack of interest in the question! For as soon as they appear in the story, they *dis*-appear, and so what's narrated is not a meeting as we might expect, but an extended response by Jesus, voiced to the disciples, that seems directed both to them and to anyone who would seek him. And the response is strange, at least to our ears:

*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.*

In other words, he *doesn't* say, "Sure, I'll meet some Greeks," but starts talking about grains of wheat falling into the earth and dying ... about those who love their lives losing them, and thereby saving them for eternal life.

All in response to an innocent request to "see" Jesus! I mean, seriously – what an incredibly odd thing to say with the crowds pressing in and a thousand different human needs demanding to be recognized!

How strange his words must have sounded even to his disciples, who had been with him for some time now and so had come to expect the unexpected. But this was different. Perhaps it took a moment for his meaning to sink in – but then, for Philip, for Andrew and the others, it did.

*Jesus is talking about his own death.*

But for those who had come to believe in him, this just wasn't possible. The crowds themselves – *Greeks* wanting to see him! – bore witness that he was the *one*. And none knew this like those who had left everything behind to follow him, whether fishermen, zealots, or tax collectors. In their time spent with him, they had come to *know* in their hearts where this journey would lead. It would lead to Jerusalem ... and *glory*! They could *see* the crown placed upon Jesus' head, and in this longed-for day, the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom! And they could see *themselves*, taking up their *own* thrones, to govern the Twelve Tribes of Israel! All their deepest desires fulfilled ... all their most desperate dreams come true.

But now ... he tells them that he's going to *lay down his life*?! And in a spontaneous burst of panic, some thoughts of self-preservation may have crossed their minds ... "And what about *us*?" But apparently, Jesus had thought of that: "*Whoever serves me must follow me. Wherever I am, there my servant will also be.*"

It's true that we're not told what happened with the Greeks hoping to see Jesus that day, but his apparent deflection may be saying more than we realize. Those Greeks may not have "seen" Jesus that day, but it seems they were not the only ones having trouble seeing him. The disciples were having trouble "seeing" him too ... misunderstanding his words, missing the point, missing *him*, and so missing *God* and what God was doing.

It's as though Jesus assumes that all of us seekers would have problems with seeing him. That with the best of intentions, we would go looking for him, but not find him. Or perhaps more often, assume that we *have* found him when we really haven't, because we're looking in the wrong place and we don't really know what he looks like anyway.

This is a key theme of Jesus' life from the very beginning (and even before!). Hundreds of years before, the prophet Micah told his people to expect a Messiah to be born, but not where they would expect. Don't look in the grand centers of empire for the one coming, he said, but rather, to Bethlehem Ephrathah, one of the "little clans of Judah."

Later, the gospel writers picked up the theme:

- Don't look to palace walls for the one destined to rule forever. Look instead to a poor, young, unwed girl who must go away from home, to an older cousin in the distant hill country, to escape the eyes of judgment before she begins to show.
- Don't look for a comfortable home and a gilded cradle for the child of promise. Listen out instead for cries coming from a donkey's feedbox in a smelly stable.
- And just wait until you get a load of those first invitees to the baby shower! See the weary, ragged shepherds – castaways, nobodies, disposable people – being welcomed to the party as the honored guests!

And you and I both know that it just gets better from there! Jesus grows up and it's more of the same! Again and again in the gospels, Jesus is upsetting our expectations, throwing us curve balls, and in general, blowing up all expectations of where God "should" be and disguising himself among the poor ... the struggling ... the disinherited, and giving all of himself, even unto death. And we the church – at our best – have spent the last two thousand years trying to catch up!

No one has understood these essential truths better than another Celt, the one who brought us that prayer from a few weeks ago ... that prayer that speaks of God's yearning for a church that spins into a "chaos of uncalculating love." Of course, I am speaking of that irrepressible Scottish churchman George MacLeod.

Despite being born into privilege, he came early on to identify heavily with the plight of the poor and with working for economic and social justice, all while grounded in a deeply prayerful, attentive way of life that saw God in all things.

To move more deeply into life, and especially into its places of struggle and suffering, like those he saw in Glasgow, is to move closer to the life of Christ, the light that is to be found within even the darkest of places. *That* is the most authentic task of the Church.

He put it best in an especially powerful passage from his book *Only One Way Left*:

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace, as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a high cross between two thieves: on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek ... At the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that's

where He died. And that is what He died about. And that is where church[people] ought to be and what church[people] should be about.”

The word “spiritual,” he believed, was often dangerously misunderstood. People generally imagine that to be “spiritual” is to turn away from the affairs of the world. But that’s the opposite of the truth. Rather, it is *to go more deeply into life*, to find God at the *heart* of life, deeper than any wrong, and to liberate God’s goodness within us and in our relationships, both individually and collectively. It is to look and listen in the midst of life in the Now, in the present moment, that we may grasp the Life that is within all life. These innumerable nows *are* our points of contact with God.

This is not to say that MacLeod didn’t believe in setting aside time for formal private and communal prayer – he DID, very strongly. But what debilitates our prayer life is not bad prayer technique, but, as he put it, “our presupposition that the pressures of life are on one side while God is on some other side.” For MacLeod, it is precisely at the pressure points of life that God is to be looked for ... to be found, as he was fond of saying, on the “High Street of life,” in the midst of the tough realities of life.

He was fond of putting it that way because of a true story that he loved to tell: Of the time that a boy threw a stone through a stained-glass window in a cathedral church. The window pictured the angels over Bethlehem announcing the birth of Jesus to the tired and lonely shepherds, and singing “GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST!” Those very words appeared in all capital letters just above the depiction of the angels. But then, the stone broke through the beautiful window. And you know where it broke through? It took out the “E” in “HIGHEST,” so now the message of the angels appeared to be “GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGH ST”!

That really does sum it up, doesn’t it? For MacLeod, the window should have been left that way, or perhaps with a swiveling panel for the letter “E” so it could say both! Glory to God in the Highest! Glory to God in the High Street! Glory to God - *everywhere*!

The trick, of course, is to learn how to *see* God in the midst of it all. It’s one thing to *affirm* God’s glory in the abstract ... it’s quite another to *see* God, to see Christ, in the mess and to live and draw strength from this seeing. This is where his life’s work – Iona – comes into the picture.

After eight years of service in Glasgow, MacLeod made the decision to resign his pastorate in 1938 and to begin the rebuilding of the ancient Abbey on the remote Isle of Iona off the western shore, where in the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Irish saint Columba had based his Celtic mission.

If you tuned in last Sunday, you will remember the “Colonies of Heaven” planted by St Patrick – dozens of Christian communities all over Ireland – established to be intentional communities of prayer, artistic and creative activity, hospitality, and team ministry ... communities which were meant to model for all to see a cooperative and peaceful way of life, and meant to *reach out* to the world. Columba carried on that legacy a century after Patrick by planting such a missional community on Iona which survived for over 300 years.

For MacLeod, such a community – inspired by his Celtic forebears and re-born on the ruins of the old – was exactly what was needed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reach the real world of today, and to train new generations of Christian leaders to discern and move with the redemptive activity of God in the midst of it all. And thus, began the present-day Iona Community, which initially consisted of MacLeod, young ministers in training, and unemployed craftsmen. They were committed not only to the restoration of the monastic buildings on the island, but to rediscovering a discipline of prayer and communal life that they might be empowered to work for God’s justice and peace in the cities.

Underpinning the Community were four emphases: the renewal of worship, the pursuit of social justice, the ministry of healing, and the practice of mission. By immersion in these, members and pilgrims could grow in their capacity to see Christ at work at the very heart of life, out in the streets, in the midst of human suffering, and to join in that work – and so participate now in the very life of the Kingdom.

Iona would prove to be his life’s work – his greatest legacy. It would remain the base from which he would have an incalculable influence on the church he loved so much.

For me, George MacLeod will always be one of the Church’s greatest witnesses to the deepest core of the Gospel – that Christ *chooses* to be found by us not in some far-off, disconnected spiritual realm, safe from the trials of the world, but rather in the *midst* of those trials, in the midst of the messy, the busy, the broken, and the very ordinary places of life. In all our searching, *there* we will find him ... There, at last, we will see him in all his glory.

And so, to that end, we pray for the enlivening, empowering Holy Spirit to fill us again for the journey ahead. In the words of one of MacLeod’s most moving prayers:

*Holy Spirit, Enlivener:  
breathe on us, fill us with life anew;  
In your new creation, already upon us,  
breaking through, groaning and travailing,  
but already breaking through,  
breathe on us.  
Till that day when night and autumn vanish  
and lambs grown sheep are no more slaughtered:  
and even the thorn shall fade  
and the whole earth shall cry Glory  
at the marriage feast of the Lamb.  
In this new creation, already upon us,  
fill us with life anew.*

To the Glory of God. Amen.