

V Lent (b)

Jn 12.20-33

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When a man falls off a cliff, the ground seems to move ever so much faster the closer it gets. The swirling and spinning details of each rock and crevice grow larger and larger.

That's a pretty good image, I think, of the last week before the crucifixion. Jesus has preached his message. The religious and secular authorities are clearly plotting to kill him. He knows with a certainty that his hour has come.

And so, on a Saturday evening, he returns to the little haven of Bethany. It was there he had raised Lazarus from the dead. Mary and Martha and Lazarus were dear and devoted friends, and they, on this evening, are hosting a dinner for him in the home of Simon the Leper.

It is a fairly typical scene from the Bethany family photo album: Jesus taking his rest, Lazarus nearby. Martha, as usual, is in the kitchen, and Mary makes her dramatic entrance. Long before, according to St. Luke, when Mary had been a woman of the city... a woman whose sins were many... she had entered a room and anointed the savior and wept the tears of a penitent. Now, she repeats this sacramental sign, but this time, there are no tears... for there is no shame. Now, she is a forgiven woman, a new creation. Love and gratitude alone direct her actions. We should be grateful to St. John for allowing us to see the transforming power of Jesus' love. He does the same with Simon Peter. Early on in his ministry, Jesus gives Simon Peter a fishing lesson : *Cast your net on the other side of the boat!* The miraculous result was so stunning that Peter remarked, *Get away from me, for I am a sinful man!* But after the resurrection, by the sea shore, St. John tells us that this incident was repeated. *Cast your net on the other side...*This time, rather than feeling shame and guilt, Peter leaps from the boat and swims to shore.

Such is the transforming power of Christ's love. And Mary, who once wept bitterly over her sins, now pours forth from her heart a love as rich and precious as the costly ointment.

The next morning, Jesus leaves Bethany and makes his way toward Jerusalem. A great crowd is already camping in the open spaces outside the city, in anticipation of the coming Passover. But the buzz and excitement surrounding Jesus soon make their way through the crowd, and as he enters, the city gate, Branches of Palm are spread in his way, as the crowd shouts exclamations of victory and joy.

They should have noted that he was not mounted on a great horse as a warrior would have been. He had no sword nor army. He came as a man of peace, proclaiming a Kingdom not of this World... But their swooning hearts and enthusiastic patriotism had no time for details. They had waited long enough. Now it was time for action. Many also were curious because they had heard that this was the wonder-worker who had raised a man from the dead. The Pharisees watched all this with alarm: *Take heed, the whole world has gone after him!*

And that is exactly where our Gospel for this morning picks up the story. Amongst the wild excitement of the Triumphal Entry, we read the simple news that two Greeks are among the crowd. And their request is simple enough. The found Philip. After all, he had a Greek name, maybe he could help them. And they said to this new friend, *Sir, we would see Jesus.*

I once preached at an ecumenical service in a Methodist Church, and carved into the pulpit, visible only to the preacher, was this one verse: *Sir, we would see Jesus.* Quite a good reminder of the preacher's task.

We don't know anything more about these two Greek men. Jesus launches off into a sermon, and they seem almost an intrusion into the text. An afterthought. A needless fragment or detail that could just as easily have been left out. Ah, don't you believe it! St. John is too good a story-teller to waste words!

Our answer is in *what* Jesus says. You see, Greek thought and philosophy were rather utilitarian. It was the result that counted!

In a sense, the presence of these two Greek men forms something of a commentary on the values of the world, much in the same way that Mary was rebuked for pouring out the costly perfume. *What a waste! Why did you do that! Why not instead sell it and give something to the poor!*

The men and women who shouted *Hosanna*, and these two representatives of the greatest culture and philosophy of their age... each in its own way is demanding to know, *What's in it for me? What's the bottom line?*

And to that Jesus answers, *unless a grain of wheat falls in the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

*He that loves his life destroys it; and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life.*

Well, we can well understand why this sounds so startling! And we can understand that when the crowd began to get something of a glimpse of what Jesus was offering them, their shouts turned from *Hosanna!* to *crucify!*

It is a tragic thing, to have a soul brought right to the very threshold of a new life in Christ...only to have them turn sadly away exclaiming, *is that all there is?*

After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, every church in this country saw a bump in attendance. But many came asking, *What's in it for me?* And instead of the answers they thought they wanted, they were given the tools of bread and wine and a basin and a towel. They were told about the grain of wheat that must die to produce fruit... and they went away sadly exclaiming, *is that all there is?*

Last week at Kanuga, Fr. Vincent unpacked for us the great transforming secret the church: That we are to be *devoted to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of Bread, and to the prayers.* Those who give themselves to this with unremitting commitment find the joy and peace that every human heart seeks. Those who only give themselves half-heartedly walk away saying, *Is that all there is? I don't get anything out of it!*

Recently, Pope Benedict has gotten himself roundly criticized by every European government and health organization because of his comments on the AIDS crisis in Africa. The voices of criticism are shrill and emphatic. But not a single critic has heard a word the man has said. He is merely saying the same thing that Jesus is saying this morning. *Spiritual health must precede pragmatic responses. Otherwise, any solution is but a band aid, a quick fix, a temporary solution.*

*What's in it for me?*

Well everything. But you can only have this treasure if you are willing to release your steady grip on every other thing that claims the place in your heart that your creator reserved for true worship.

*The dearest idols I have known...Ah! And there are so many!*

But there is only one treasure... the compelling love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus.

*Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say, Father save me from this hour? Now is the judgment of this world. Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am high lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.*

Amen+++