

SERMON- Lent 5(B)

Charles R. Cowherd

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

March 17, 2024

John 12:20-33

Psalm 51:1-13

OPENING:

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

That's what the Greeks say in our Gospel today, at this dramatic scene in Jerusalem, in John's account of the time before the Passion.

“We wish to see Jesus.”

That verse from John is often inscribed physically (in some way) upon pulpits at churches across the world... at cathedrals and especially at seminary chapels and elsewhere.

It's there as a reminder to those who preach from the pulpit that **THAT** is what those assembled are looking for.

“We wish to see Jesus.”

They are not looking for therapy.

They are not looking for you to speak ‘truth to power.’

They are not (Charles Robison Cowherd) looking for a friend or a nice joke.

They are not even looking for you to explain that day's scripture, *per se*.

Rather they/you are saying: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

AUMBRY:

Twice recently, when I have been showing our church to folks for the first time, people have echoed what the Greeks have to say, in a slightly different way:

They have asked, upon entering the sanctuary: “Where is Jesus?”

Strange question, you might think, but the first time it happened was back in January by our (now) soon-to-be Associate Rector, the Reverend Mario Melendez.

He walked in, and his eyes scanned the scene and what he actually was asked was:

“Where do you keep the Reserve Sacrament?”

This was his way of asking “Where is Jesus?”

The answer is the humble rectangular box that sits, obscured by the half-wall, over my right shoulder.

Functionally, that's where the Bread is stored to be taken to the sick during the week.

Theologically, that's where the Body and Blood of Christ, having been transformed from mere bread and wine into Jesus himself, remains during the week.

That's what he was asking: “where does Jesus live in this church, after he has been broken and given for the people of God, where does he abide?”

The technical term for that place is “aumbry.” Some call it a “Tabernacle.”

By any name, there “it” remains:
... treasured, hidden, humble...
the “Light of the World” guarded by this solitary light.

I filed that encounter away until more recently when a second person asked that same question of the Greeks: “We have come to see Jesus... where is he?”
This was a visitor, a newcomer from across the Tiber River, from Rome, so to speak, actually from just across Elden Street, from St. Joseph’s Catholic Church.

Again, the question concerned the “Reserved Sacrament” and I explained again. Without putting words in their mouths, both questions concern a holy geography, one that privileges a physical space for the consecrated Jesus to be kept. It looks for our architecture and our Eucharistic practice to demonstrate the reality of how God is present, where the act of Communion is so powerful, that time and place cannot hold Jesus to the 1st century Palestine, but he is here with us in the Bread and Wine.

PULPIT

Now my Low Church proclivities and habits mean that I did not know what an Aumbry or a Reserve Sacrament was until a few years ago.

That’s, okay:

“All God’s people got a place in the choir, some sing low, some higher.”

Both questions were asked, mind you, respectfully, curiously. The tone was not unlike the Greeks from our passage who say it almost in a manner of fact way: “We wish to see Jesus.”

We all long to see Jesus. Do we not?

Frustratingly, we don’t know if the Greeks ever got to meet him, but we *do* know the answer that Jesus gives when the question is asked. More on that in a moment.

I started this sermon by talking about how this verse (“We wish to see Jesus”) was inscribed in pulpits, rather than in tabernacles.

That’s because the Protestant Reformation put a greater emphasis on preaching.

The claim, then, is that one can find Jesus in a sermon, in a homily, in addition to the physical Sacrament.

Churches often reflect that by having elaborate and vaulted pulpits, high above the congregation, innately ordained, so as to emphasize the importance of God’s Word.

Our humble pulpit here, frankly, does not convey that idea,

and so it's the poor job of the preacher to convey it. Nor do we, in fact, have a vaunted Aumbry or an elaborate space for the Reserved Sacrament. So you have to do some work there as well.

There is a saying in church architecture that "the Space always wins" and it means that whatever "hot air" is emanating from the preacher's mouth during a sermon, that the architecture is what gets into the hearts and souls, into the very bones, of the faithful.

Winston Churchill said it eloquently in a different context:

"First you shape our buildings, afterwards the buildings shape us."¹

So where do YOU the people of St. Timothy's find Jesus.... In this place, and in your lives?

An easy answer is to fall back onto the idea that Jesus is everywhere. The idea of a "sacramental universe."

This idea can be explained by the famous exchange between Martin Luther and a theological opponent who told Luther that "Christ, being raised and seated at God's right hand, could not be physically present in the sacrament (of Bread and Wine)." (Luther's response was classic Luther...) "God is present in your cabbage soup as in the sacrament, the difference is that God is hidden in the soup and revealed in the sacrament."²

ANGLICAN

I think that is indeed true that God is everywhere, in our Cabbage Soup or at the beach or in long walks in the mountain and in churches.

But I am partial to the latter.

Here at St. Tim's, I think the architecture, if anything, is trying to say that you find Jesus here in the area around the altar, because the dominant element in our space is the sails, which symbolize the twelve disciples coming together here with the stained glass by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That, by the way, is the classic Anglican understanding of the Eucharist, that Jesus is present most fully in our shared participation, our Communion, of our becoming one with one another and Jesus through one bread and one Cup.

I think that was intentional, and I suppose I should answer with that the next time someone comes into our space and asks to see Jesus.

¹ [Churchill and the Commons Chamber - UK Parliament](#)

² [Lutheran Sacramental Imagination - ELCA](#)

Again, we are allowed to disagree and have different focuses.

“All God’s Creatures....”

CONCLUSION

How does Jesus answer the Greeks’ question though? In his context when he was nearing his death, *and* in our context of Lent. Where is he?

Jesus answers with this idea (that I hope I have been preaching on the last few weeks), he says, if you want to find me... well... “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified... When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

In other words, he says he has to lose his life in order for us all to be saved. Last week, I talked about the moment in our service where the priest lifts up the elements, lifts up Jesus. That’s an incredibly powerful moment because we are beholding the slain Lamb of God, we are looking up at God’s broken body, wondrous and terrifying to behold, knowing that it’s what killed Jesus, but also gives us everlasting life.

It means that this horrible snake, this serpent in the desert, along with your sin and your Lenten pain, is all being raised up drawn into who Jesus is, who will die, be sent into the ground, only to bear the fruit of your salvation.

If I sound like a broken record, it’s because John’s Gospel keeps repeating it. It’s John’s version (someone once said) of the “Sanctus Bells”—this is another Anglo-Catholic idea—the ringing of bells to indicate the special consecratory moment. During Medieval times, that moment—Jesus being lifted up in all his pain and glory—was so highly anticipated and so deeply treasured that folks who had come to see Jesus would yell out for the priest to hold the host up there.

Some would even leave church after that moment, confident that “seeing” the elements was enough, that you were protected.

Like seeing the snake in Moses’ day, it had this reverse-Medusa effect where belief followed. “Seeing is believing”—even though believing is too horrible to behold, that believing also meant dying.

That’s a lot so I will end here, with a gracious invitation that if you want to see Jesus, come to the services in Holy Week, to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to be with Jesus in life and his death and his life to come. **AMEN**