

Seeing is believing.

John 12:20-33

We used to say “seeing is believing” but in this day and age of AI generation of imagery, that no longer seems to be the case. Anyone can find some key words or a description to generate an image and with a bit of practice get something that looks reasonably realistic. The day before I went to Sydney, I spent time doing a rather overdue clean out of my fridge (throwing out a bottle that had been pushed to the back and expired in 2016). Afterwards with a bit of trial and error, I was able to get AI to make me a “fridge cleaning proficiency badge” in the style of the Girl Guide badges and I promptly posted the “bade” on FB. Clearly seeing is no longer believing.

Today I earned my fridge cleaning proficiency badge, which was well overdue. I confess to finding preserves that were dated back to 2008.



In John's day, seeing was not believing either. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. Why? We are not told. In fact, they disappear from the story and are something more like an AI prompt to launch into a theological discussion, at least when we hear this story from the selected lectionary readings.

Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. At the end of the previous story, which recounts the entry into Jerusalem, the Pharisees complain “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” It's not just the poor Jewish people who want to hear what he has to say, but the people who are so committed to their faith that they will travel from far-flung lands to experience a Passover in Jerusalem. At that time this trip took a lot of commitment. The observation of the Pharisees is fulfilled and people representing “all the world” really do want to come and see Jesus. But is seeing really believing? John would argue no.

There are many reasons why people may want to see Jesus – curiosity, inquiry, interest, or perhaps to gather ammunition to tear him down. We are not given any clues as to their motivation; however it shows the spreading of the knowledge of this itinerant teacher from the wrong side of the tracks.

And what did these Greeks see? Well, assuming they continue to be present in the crowd, they hear two interpretations of the coming death of Jesus. One commentator notes this chapter is rather densely packed with the author's interpretation of Jesus' death, but to for us to see it, we need to set aside the various later interpretations that have become insidious in our tradition. That is a whole other sermon, so I am simply going to note it because at least two of these interpretations appear in our reading today.

The first of these interpretations is the metaphor of planting a seed. Death is an important part of life and in an era when one understanding was that people were rewarded (or punished) in this life, this was also something that needed to be addressed. We later see the crowd saying a variation of “how can the Messiah be killed?” because that would be an indication of not being blessed by God.

We once again have this theology emerging in fundamentalist branches of Christianity. If you have heard the televangelists who spout the so-called “prosperity gospel,” you will have seen this understanding in action. Of course, if we think that we know God will give health and wealth in this life to people who are faithful, it is

only a small step to assuming that people without health or wealth are obviously sinners or cursed.

The story of Jesus tells us something different and here he basically says to stop worrying about all of that – live life authentically as a follower of the Messiah. This idea would have been comforting to the early church, not only as they answered accusations about their Messiah, but also as they faced similar suffering.

The other allusion to death is that of being lifted up. Last week we heard the story of the bronze snake in Numbers and, given this gospel was written to be read in a single sitting, it is not that long ago that Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about the bronze snake:

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (3:14-15)

In the world of the ancient Mediterranean, snakes were a symbol of healing. It is why the symbol of the medical profession is that of the Caduceus, two snakes on a staff



usually with wings. When snakes shed their skin, they go from a sluggish state to having vitality and so in the ancient mind this became associated not only with healing, but also with longevity and immortality, or to use the phrase from John's Gospel – life in all its fullness.

As with the story of the bronze snake, the death of Jesus is depicted as an event that enables people to look on him for healing. Perhaps this is why the Greeks wanted to “see” Jesus to look on him as the ancients had seen the bronze snake in the wilderness. What healing did they need? We can only use our imagination for that, but it raises the question of what healing we need as well.

And there is another part to this story that affirms Jesus in talking about his death, which is the voice from heaven. The crowd give various reactions – thunder or an angel – but thunder was considered to be God's voice, and as an angel means “messenger from God, the result is the same. The crowd knew God spoke, even if they did not know what was being said. So, in this exploration of the forthcoming death of Jesus, the vindication of the resurrection is already apparent in the voice of God.

As we come to the final weeks drawing towards Easter, what is it that we see when we see Jesus. What are our motivations? How do we answer his invitation to a fullness of life and experiencing healing – and in what ways are we called to share that invitation with the world around us?