

“Life in Jesus’ name”
by Rev. Frances Savill
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5th Sunday of Lent

John 12:20-33

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life (psuchē) lose it, and those who hate their life (psuchē) in this world will keep it for eternal life (zōē). ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ “Now my soul (psuchē) 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. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Consider for a moment the situation, where our text begins. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. The Greeks were in Jerusalem for Passover, probably they were converts to Judaism, and they wanted to see Jesus. There is a sense in the Biblical text that they kept asking for Jesus, and their question hangs in the air: can they see Jesus. Will Jesus greet them, welcome them, teach them, what will he say to them?

Jesus doesn’t answer the question directly. In fact, you have to read closely, keeping the question in mind, to catch that there is an answer.

What is at stake in the question is the scope of Jesus’ mission. Was Jesus the Messiah the Jews expected who would lead them to political victory, who would usher in an age of peace, and Jewish rule, or was his kingdom something more? Was the kingdom of God something greater?

We catch that something important hangs in the balance by Jesus' response. When Jesus hears that the Greeks want to see him, he launches into a long speech that begins with the words: "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."

"The hour" that Jesus is referring to is the hour of his approaching death. Notice that his death is how he is glorified. And Jesus begins to explain that his death is going to bear much fruit. Much is going to happen because of his death. Then he goes on to one of those very difficult sayings: "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Jesus is speaking first and foremost about himself. He "hates" his "psuchein" life in this world. "Hates" is used as the opposite of "loves". "Psuchein" is also translated as "soul" and it refers to our earthly lives, but also that part of us that is the seat of our feelings, desires, affections, and aversions.

So loving our lives, in this context, doesn't mean that we are happy with our situation, or that we like our lives, rather it means that we hold on to them, guarding them, protecting them, saving them, preserving our desires and affections, guarding our happiness. It's the choice of doing life God's way, or being our own Masters, doing it on our own terms, having our own way.

Jesus does just the opposite. He doesn't preserve his life, his soul, his affections and desires, in this world, he doesn't guard or protect his life, he loses it, gives it away, pours himself out into the people he is with. He chooses not his own plan, but God's plan.

And surprisingly, Jesus says that loving, holding on to our "psuchein" lives destroys our lives, our souls, now in the present. But hating our "psuchein" lives, giving them up, pouring them out, chooses not to be the captain of our own ships, but embraces God's way, will preserve, guard and keeps our "zoa" life for eternity. "Zoa" life is different, it is absolute fullness of life, life which is blessed by God, it is animate, full of vitality; it is life which is to the full and stretches on into eternity.

In verse 27 Jesus continues, "now my soul, my "psuchein" is troubled. And what should I say "Father, save me from this hour of coming suffering and death"?

"No," says Jesus, it was for this hour that he came. Then he cried out to the Father: "Father glorify your name." The heavens trembled, a voice thundered, "I have glorified it already and will again". The crowd responded "thunder", others "angels."

Jesus continued: "Now is the judgment 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." When Jesus is lifted up, when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, when he is lifted up in his resurrection, when he is lifted up to the right hand of the Father, having ascended to his throne, when he is lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent (for those who were here last week).

The judgment of the world, and the ruler of this world is driven out through all that Jesus accomplishes at the cross. Jesus' words on the cross are: "It is finished" all that Jesus came to do he has done. His work is completed.

When he is lifted up from the earth, he will draw all people to himself. That is the centre of the answer that was asked at the beginning of our text. The Greeks will see Jesus, all people will see him, all people will be drawn to him.

That word that we have translated as "draw", is usually translated as 'dragged' or "hauled". The net of fished is dragged into the boat, a person is hauled into court. People will be drawn by the inward power, lead, compelled, or hauled in.

God's kingdom, ushered in by Jesus, announced as present and coming to fulfillment, is a great and glorious kingdom not just for Israel, but for all. It is not a small movement, but something that bears much fruit, and has the pull to compel all people to Jesus. It is the glory of the Son, revealed in the cross.

He came to bring life (zoa life) abundant, eternal life. He came not to do his own will, not to act out of his own desires, to protect and build up his own ego, accomplishing his own plans. He came in love, complete and total love for God and others.

Jesus knew that love would lead him to death. He knew himself to be like a grain of wheat that would fall to the ground, giving it's life so that great new life, and much fruit would be borne.

Jesus knew that for the Greeks to find their place in his kingdom, for all people to find their place in the kingdom of God, that he would have to be lifted up on the cross. Freely, he gave his love, poured out to death, even death on a cross.

His prayer was to glorify God. That glory was revealed already and again, in Jesus' life of doing all things according to His Father's plan, his "hating" his life, being willing to pour out himself for the sake of others, and ultimately in the cross.

In verse 26 "where the Master is, there the servant is also". But we, in our own strength are not capable of "hating" our lives. Everything in us rebels at the words and when we try, in our own power to give God all, to live fully for God and others we end up with some kind of miserable works righteousness martyrdom, that in no way resembles the zoa life of Jesus that bears the fruit of eternal life.

But surrendering our lives to Jesus, trusting in his righteousness, embracing his way of the cross, taking on Jesus' yoke and learning from him, we find rest for our souls, our psuchein lives, which leads us to life (zoa) eternal.

If you were following in your Bibles, you may have noticed that I skipped a sentence. Those who serve the Son... did you hear the rest of the sentence? Those who serve the Son, those who learn the self-giving love of Jesus, who entrust themselves to him, embrace his cross, and allow him to reach out and pull us in, what does it say about them, about us?

I expected the text to say, "those who serve the Son, honour the Father". But in fact, the text reads, "those who serve the Son, the Father honours. God the Father honours us who serve the Son. The Son, who willingly, freely, without reserve gave his life for us, so that we might come to him, as we come and follow and serve, God honours us.

What wondrous good news. Thanks be to God.