

### “To Meet Jesus”

I used to listen to a BBC program called Desert Island Discs on a local classical radio station. The idea was that someone of renown would serve as the “castaway” on the show and offer up a list of their eight favorite albums. These would be albums that, should they be stranded on a desert island, they would want to have with them. They would not just name the albums but explain why they wanted them on the island. The reason could be that the music was sublime like Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” or complex and challenging like any one of Mahler’s symphonies. The music did not have to be classical, and some might pick Miles Davis’s “Kind of Blue” for the power of his jazz or The Beatles’ “Rubber Soul” for some pop tunes to sing along with. It was fun to learn what people liked and why.

A similar idea is to ask someone whom they would invite to supper from the past or present. Sometimes the respondent is limited to writers, or musicians, or historical figures. We learn a lot about the respondent given who they choose. Who would you choose? Just shout it out, and do not limit yourself to some obvious religious figures just because you are in church. This is not a piety test.

I wonder if we took a poll of believers how many would want to meet Jesus and how many might not. There are compelling reasons to meet Jesus. Perhaps we have our doubts about the resurrection like St. Thomas. We might want Jesus to explain for us some of his more perplexing parables. Maybe we want to see what he looked like, how he dressed, or the sound of his voice. There are a myriad issues, mysteries, and uncertainties we might want to explore with him.

There are also reasons we may not want to meet Jesus. Perhaps meeting him in person might shatter some of our beliefs about him. For example, he might not look anything like how artists have imagined him over millennia. Or what if he were to tell us we had missed the point of his ministry, that could throw us for a loop? The explanations he might give us would did not fit with centuries of received teaching or dogma. That could mess with our beliefs and the entire structure of the Church, theology, and even western society.

In today’s Gospel reading when the outsiders ask Phillip if they can meet Jesus, I wonder who they were looking forward to meeting. Did they want to meet the teacher who spoke in parables or the preacher who told about the coming of the Kingdom of God? Or did they want to meet the troublemaker who upset the tables in the Temple? Did they want to meet the miracle worker who healed the sick and lame, and raised people from the dead? Did they want to meet the erudite Rabbi whose education was a mystery? Or did they want to meet the Rabbi who violated the Sabbath? Did they want to meet the man who drew crowds to him or was it the man of faith who consorted with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes who they wanted to meet? Were they looking to meet him to learn from him or just to shake his hand because of his renown and celebrity? Perhaps they were criminals sent by the Romans or the Sanhedrin to kidnap or kill Jesus? We do not know, because their request to meet Jesus turns the narrative onto another path altogether.

Jesus does not respond with the expected “yes” or “no” to the simple question about meeting him. Instead, he heads down a dark and troubling track. There seems to be something about these two non-Jews asking to meet him that triggers a foreboding in him. Jesus has reached a crossroads. In the Gospel of John Jesus has been preaching and teaching throughout Palestine for three years. He had said earlier that his ministry was to be only to the Jews. Now Gentiles have come to Jerusalem

during the Passover Festival to find him. Could it be that Jesus was waiting for this as a sign that his ministry was finished? Could it be that Jesus was thinking that when his ministry reached beyond Palestine it was time to turn it over to the disciples? If so, Jesus knew what that meant for him; it meant crucifixion and death.

Thus, he begins to speak in metaphors. First, he says it is time for his glorification, which in John equals crucifixion. He says that his death will be like that of a seed that falls to the ground and having died, lives again in the fruit that it bears. Fruit that is more numerous than the one grain that it grew from.

He then challenges his first disciples and by extension all of us through history to take up our cross just as he will take up his. By taking up our cross we take up our burden and responsibility for telling the story, living the story, and indeed becoming part of the story down through the ages.

Jesus goes on to say that while his spirit is troubled, he is not going to ask that the cup pass him by. Rather this was how it was supposed to be from the beginning. He would have to suffer rejection by the religious authorities and be killed by the political system. The example he sets is the prototype for all Christians. We are called to bear witness to Jesus through our own trials. We all have a cross to bear and we should bear it boldly and with courage.

That is a lot to ask of people who live comfortably and safely. It may be easier for those who live on the edge just as Jesus and his disciples did. I have heard more than one American coming back from a mission trip describe the powerful faith of the people they served. Could it be that if we were not distracted by consumer goods, luxuries, filthy lucre, power, and prestige we too would have a deeper faith?

We must screw our courage to the sticking place and live as our savior called us to live. We must take chances for the Gospel by doing things that are uncomfortable for the sake of his love. It may mean helping the homeless, feeding the poor, visiting those in prison, bearing witness to those who may not want to hear, or standing firm in our beliefs when we are challenged by those who deny the Gospel. There is much more to living our faith than coming to church on Sunday and putting something in the offering plate. Jesus demands more from us than what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "easy grace."

Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to put his life on the line. Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>1</sup> Few of us are called to that extreme. But we are called to take up our cross and bear it because Jesus did. This Lenten season ponder why you would want to meet Jesus. When you do meet Jesus could you look him in the eye knowing you bore the cross you were given to bear as faithfully as he did.

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:13 NRSV