

**WITNESS TO THE WORD:** 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus'.

When I began my theological studies, my favourite subject was Art & Spirituality. One of our assignments was to research the icons and paintings known collectively as 'Man of Sorrows'. They go back as far as the 12<sup>th</sup> century and usually depict Jesus with a sorrowful face, turned to one side, his crucifixion wounds very evident.

My focus painting hangs in the National Gallery of Victoria. It was painted by the German artist Hans Memling in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and it shows Jesus cradled in the arms of his bereft mother, with tiny images of his disciples and the symbols of his crucifixion in the background. I still find it deeply moving and in reflecting on this week's Gospel passage, I couldn't help but remember it – 'The Man of Sorrows'.

During the Jewish feast of Passover, some Gentile pilgrims approached Philip with a request that the disciples must have fielded many times during Jesus's ministry. Had they travelled all the way to Jerusalem just to ask their question?

Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

Philip relayed their request to Andrew, and together they told Jesus. But their query fizzles out and the story then takes a new turn. We never learn if the Gentile pilgrims got an audience with the one about whom they had heard so many rumours. Jesus ignored their question. He had darker things on his mind than the curiosity of the crowds.

Theologian Daniel Clendenin in his commentary on today's lectionary raises an interesting idea:

I wonder — was theirs an honest question? Were these pilgrims genuine seekers or just sticky beaks? What did they hope to see or want to hear from Jesus?

We don't know if they ever saw Jesus, but their question hangs in the air. Perhaps it's a question we've all asked in our own ways, and with our own motives. It sounds so simple. A straightforward request. But is it, really? Ever? Maybe it's one of those questions that asks more than we could ever realize. Perhaps it's an example of "be careful what you wish for."

Do I really want the real Jesus? Which Jesus? And why?

Are we looking for the miracle worker who turned water to wine and raised Lazarus from the dead? Or maybe the storyteller whose parables simultaneously revealed and obscured? The political Jesus who

debated Roman taxes with the Pharisees but welcomed Roman tax collectors? The renegade rabbi who violated purity laws, broke the sabbath, welcomed prostitutes and adulterers, ate with ethnic outsiders, and who profaned Israel's most sacred space - the temple?

The Jesus of John's gospel for this week is a deeply disturbed man. "Now my soul is troubled," he says. But he never asks God to save him from his troubles. He says that his troubles are the very reason he came.

Truly he was a man of sorrows.

*"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The person who loves his life will lose it, while the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant will also be. My Father will honour the one who serves me."*

This saying of Jesus was so central to his mission and message that all four gospels include it (and twice in Luke).

The epistle for today that Paul read to us, paints a similar picture of Jesus. Hebrews describes him as a person who was "subject to weakness." He was

"tempted in every way, just as we are." He prayed his prayers to God "with loud cries and tears." This Jesus was despised and rejected; a man of sorrows who knew from experience the meaning of grief.

This notion of a deeply disturbed Jesus who was tempted and tried like we all are, bothered some of his earliest followers. Upon hearing words like these, Peter was shocked: "Lord, this shall never happen to you."

The second-century Gnostic movement argued that Jesus only "seemed" human. Surely, he wasn't polluted by the trials and tribulations of our material existence! Similarly, Jesus's baptism in the Jordan river made some Christians nervous – wasn't he without sin?

This impulse to airbrush the humanity of Jesus remains with us today. The 1988 movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* portrays a deeply troubled Jesus. He confesses his sins, he fears insanity, he wonders if he's merely a man, and he anguishes over the people he didn't heal. He wonders what his life might have been like if he had chosen the path of an ordinary person.

Many Christians were outraged by the movie. Blockbuster Video (remember them?!) even refused to carry it. What bothered people was the suggestion that Jesus was fully and truly human, that he was a person who experienced trials and temptations like we do — torment, doubt, loneliness, confusion, despair, and, in his final hours, feeling abandoned by God.

But in trying to protect a perfect Jesus from genuine humanity, we do the opposite of what he himself says and does. Instead of insulating himself from us, he fully participates with us.

Earlier in Hebrews we read that Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin."

Consequently, since Jesus was subject to all our own weaknesses, "he is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray."

The troubled Jesus shows us the human face of a compassionate God. Instead of fearing a far-off deity, says Hebrews, "let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need."

This passage from John and our Lenten theme of harmony may not seem to be close companions. But Gerard Moore who wrote our Lenten reflections for this week points out the connections quite clearly.

The introductions of the Greeks calls us to be inclusive. Their desire to 'see' Jesus challenges us to open our eyes and hearts to look afresh at the man we follow. Do we shun outsiders because they threaten our comfort zones?

Gerard Moore makes a very telling statement: "Christian harmony is not about maintaining the status quo, but respecting the surprises that seek us out".

It is in 'seeing Jesus' in all his humanity and grace, that **we** can embrace the Cross and reach out in service to all, as Christ's hands, eyes, feet and heart. These are the seeds of Christian harmony.

As we move rapidly toward Holy Week, we would do well to come as the Greeks before the Lord – **asking to see Jesus** – to discover what he is all about and where he is calling us to follow. And as we witness the ultimate example that he provides, we can follow him into a life of true meaning and become transformed by what we see. Amen.