

# Fifth Sunday in Lent

**LET'S SEE**

**John 12:20-33**

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**Analysis by Jerome Burce**

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 lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 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 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.

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Critical View

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *An Eye for Rubes and Rascals*

They're "Greeks" (v. 20). Not ethnic Greeks, one guesses, but Greek-speaking Jews (cf. Acts 6:1), children of the Diaspora. Else why are they come to bend the knee at a Passover festival in Jerusalem? We might think of them today as cosmopolitan expatriates on a visit to the motherland, at once pious and critical, glad to be there but with eyes wide open to the habits of the bumpkins who never left home. And they want to "see Jesus" (v. 21), the fellow said to be at the heart of the fuss that swirled in the streets when their caravan clip-clopped into town the other day. But why do they want to see him? For reasons that would please and honor the one they want to see? Not a chance. Signing autographs is hardly his thing. Nor is pandering to the whims of self-styled sophisticates who want to "see for themselves" and reach their own conclusions about this guy from Galilee of whom they're hearing such wild things, for example, that he's the Messiah (v. 13), or that he raises the dead (v. 17).

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *The Skeptic's Rules*

And really, what else can this yen to see be all about? Then as now the world is rife with rumors of this and tales of that. Words are cheap, empty promises abound, and so do the fools who fall for them. That's why "buyer beware" and "check it out first" are essential rules of thumb for anyone with an ounce of common sense. This is especially so in matters of religion, a charlatan's playground if ever there was one. Will I join a church without lots of prior visits? No. Will you agree that so-and-so is a fabulous preacher until you've listened for

yourself? I don't suppose so. Still less will these wise Greeks (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22) allow themselves to be swept away in the Jesus tide until they've scoped the fellow out; or to put that another way, until they've passed judgment on him. They, like we, are bound to do this. They've got to do it, for their children's sake if not their own. "Now is the judgment of the world," says Jesus (v. 31). Yes, of course he's speaking of what God is doing to the world. But isn't he speaking first of what the world keeps doing to him through the likes of my own wise-to-the-world heart? A Greek-ish heart, you might say, one that has no choice except to choose, that is, to peer at everyone and everything, Jesus included, through critical, assessing eyes, and only then to decide whether to follow and serve (v. 26) or, alternatively, to join the opposition that troubles Jesus' soul (v. 27) and forces his death (cf. v. 24).

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Weeping Eyes***

No wonder then that Jesus declines in the present instance to grant the Greeks the audience they seek. Though as his ensuing comments suggest, there's more to his refusal than a knee-jerk reaction to the impertinence of their request. Truth is, they haven't the capacity to assess him with any accuracy at all. Greek-ish eyes and hearts are skewed eyes and hearts. They're the invention of the "ruler of the world" (v. 31) at whose primordial prompting "the woman saw that the tree was good for food" and "a delight to the eye," with the result that "the eyes of both were opened" to the possibility if not the baseline assumption that God is a fraud and a liar (Gen 3:6-7). To this day the rules of thumb their children operate with (Step 2) arise from that assumption, that there is no one who is trustworthy, no, not one. As such they're the devil's rules, designed ultimately to hold God in the balance and find him wanting, and with God, the One whom God has sent (cf. 3:32, 5:38). So why grant an audience to folks who are bound to get it

wrong; who in scoping him out will not and cannot come to believe in him. Here in a nutshell is Part I of God's "judgment of this world" (v. 31): that we all deserve to stand where those Greeks are left standing: on the edge of the crowd, at the far periphery. Or in the parlance of the synoptics, "in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth."

## **PROGNOSIS: The Cruciform View**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) :** *Eyes on the Lamb*  
But now comes Part II of God's judgment, this one directed not at the devil's human thralls but at "the ruler of this world" himself, who will be "driven out" (v. 31). He'll be exorcised, that is, his power broken. It will happen when "the Son of Man" is "glorified" (v. 23); that is, when Jesus presents himself for viewing by Hebrews, Latins, Greeks (19:20) and any other onlooker in a form beyond comprehension. Christ crucified makes a mockery of the devil's rules of thumb, the ones we use incessantly because we have to. We can't "check him out" because who would wish to, so horrible is the sight. We can't "see for ourselves" because the view that fills our eyes is in direct contradiction to any notion of power, glory, triumph, justice, mercy, righteousness, achievement, etc. that we might use in assessing any work of God, let alone his greatest work. The rules fail us, in other words; and they fail us so badly that the ruler who pushes them is thoroughly exposed as the liar he is (8:44). At this point those who "wish to see Jesus" (v. 21) have no choice expect to rely on God's word and Spirit, those Scriptures and that Advocate who testify on Jesus' behalf (5:36, 15:26, NRSV). Notice how the evangelist does precisely this in his telling of the scene (19:24, 28, 36, 37). And in and through that telling we behold at last the glory (1:14) of the One who hangs there. We see, for example, not a crucified failure but the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 19:36). This includes the sin of obeying the devil's worldly

rules; of insisting on seeing for ourselves and thereby daring to judge Almighty God.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *The Spirit's Rules*

Who, hearing of mercy so great and trusting it, will not be drawn from the edges to stand with the One who was lifted up to accomplish this (v. 32)? That's what starts to happen when the world's ruler gets the boot and the rule of word and Spirit takes over. And with that new rule come new rules of thumb, passed to us directly from Jesus, now risen from the dead. "Don't be afraid" (6:20). That's the first of them. And like it is another: "Peace be with you" (20:19), where "you" is in the plural, inviting us to drop the now discredited habit of scoping each other out. God, after all, has made his peace in Christ with all of us, adding to that already unspeakable gift a further boon of the "clean heart" David once prayed for (Ps. 51:10): not a Greek-ish heart, but a cruciform one. Cruciform hearts have the nerve to "hate their life in this [see-for-yourself] world" (v. 25). They can't imagine approaching God's person and promise in Christ with anything less than joyful trust. They're eager to "serve" and "follow" Jesus, and if that lands them "where I am" (v. 26), so be it, even if the "where" that Jesus has in mind is the cross he's about to get nailed to. Again, that first new rule of thumb: "Don't be afraid," least of all of being caught and carried in the Jesus tide, wherever that may take you.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *An Eye for Future Saints*

Speaking of the Jesus tide, it runs in two directions these days. As promised, the death of God's Son on a cross continues to be strangely attractive. It draws people to him (v. 32-33). Now and then they show up in a flood, more often in a trickle. See, for example, the annual intake number of your average U.S.

congregation, the ones where Christ Crucified is steadily featured. But then the people drawn in are regularly swept out. "Sent," as Jesus will say (20:21), and sent expressly to live as expatriates in this world, operating within it by those peculiar rules of thumb that spring from their cruciform hearts and control their cruciform eyes. A small example how of that works: when Greek-ish eyes are clip-clopped into town they look around and see bumpkins (Step One). By contrast, cruciform eyes look around and see people Jesus died for. And that's how they treat them, much to the surprise of the folks on the receiving end of the treatment; some of whom may well be moved to say as the Greeks did, "We want to see Jesus." To which the Easter age answer is simply this: "Great to hear it. Come along. He wants to see you too."