

Jeremiah 31: 31-34
Hebrews 5: 5-10
John 12: 20-33

We wish to see Jesus.

So said some Greeks, as we heard in today's gospel reading.

Among those in Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover although they may just have been soaking up the atmosphere.

The Greeks spoke to the apostle Philip.

And I rather like what happened next.

Philip speaks to Andrew, and then Philip and Andrew decide that perhaps they both ought to go and tell Jesus – 'sorry, boss but there are some Greeks to see you'.

Canon Nicola and I do something similar when we need to speak to the Dean!

Today marks the start of Passiontide.

Lent continues on.

But we step up a gear, journeying ever closer to the foot of the cross, grappling with what that means and what that implies.

We never hear very much about the Greeks.

Even whether they get their audience with Jesus.

But it appears that Jesus' mind is on other things.

'The hour has come', Jesus says (which would probably just have confused the visiting Greeks!).

'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'

'My soul is troubled', Jesus continues.

'Should I say: 'Father save me from this hour?'

'No,' Jesus says, 'it is for this reason that I have come'.

And then: '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.'

'If it dies, it bears much fruit'.

What needs to die in us to bear fruit?

That's my question: what needs to die in us to bear fruit?

Christ-like fruit.

This week – on Wednesday – as part of our social justice programme here at Bristol Cathedral we held a public meeting on homelessness.

The Chapter House was packed.

It was the rowdiest meeting that I think I have ever been to.

(and as the chair, this was certainly challenging!)

Some of the people at the meeting were themselves homeless and in some cases they arrived with all their worldly goods, and in one case I even noticed the face of a dog poking out from a carrier bag.

It was good to see such diversity at the Cathedral!

At the meeting, we were specifically addressing the issue of how one strikes a balance between compassion and kindness towards people on the streets – people who are often vulnerable and the hard fact that at times rules and regulations governing what people can and can't do have to be enforced.

Tents on College Green, that kind of thing.

There is some controversy surrounding this.

And it falls to an organisation called StreetWise to enforce the rules although only after all other 'softer' avenues have been exhausted.

But compassion and rules

How do we get this right?

And from the off, the meeting was volatile.

There was a lot of anger at the meeting.

'Never mind the housing shortage,' someone shouted, 'what about all the empty housing around now?'

'Rich people don't care. The rich people take everything. That's the problem.'

And to the speaker from Streetwise: 'Why are you moving on me when I'm just selling the big issue...I'm not anti-social. What's anti-social about selling the big issue.'

And so it went on...interruption after interruption.

And for many of us present – all of us perhaps – the occasion was quite disturbing.

Unsettling.

Alarming.

And the temptation for all of us – surely – is to turn away.

To extricate ourselves from such an unruly and intimidating situation.

And to back off.

I certainly had an element of foreboding in the days leading up to the event, and as the audience gathered on the night.

'Father, save me from this hour'.

So I understand the temptation to turn away – as does Jesus.

But turning away, backing off, is not the path of discipleship.

It is not the way of the cross.

This week as I have talked and reflected with many of you about Wednesday's events, I have had a profound, profound sense that this is where God wants us.

Yes, it is messy.

Yes, it is disorderly, threatening, unsettling.

But it is where we need to be.

We need to hear the anger.

(And not rationalise whether it is fair or reasonable or whether it is right or wrong. Just to hear it.)

And if we are unsettled, worried or anxious in this situation – or indeed other situations you may be experiencing in your own lives – we need to ask ourselves why this is.

Why are we unsettled, worried or anxious?

What needs to die in us if we are to bear fruit?

What needs to die in the institutional church if Jesus is to reign?

It is hard listening to anger.

When you are prosperous, live in a nice house, with carpets and soft furnishings, central heating, and with food on the table.

It is hard listening to the anger of people who don't have these things.

It is hard because though the issues are inevitably complicated – of course they are – and individual lives are complicated – we know deep down that the anger is justified.

That the things they are talking about are not right.

And people like you and me probably do sleep too soundly in our beds.

And yet, in the complexity of the world and the complexity of our lives, we don't know how to fix things, to make things better.

That is an uncomfortable place to be.

What needs to die in us to bear fruit?

What does?

And while it is not really for me to tell you what needs to die.

That is between you and your God.

I will tell you this.

For me, what needs to die is my sense that I can turn my face away.

I cannot – not if I want to stay faithful to Christ.

'Father, save me from this hour.'

'No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour', Jesus replies to his own question.

And what else needs to die in me?

What else needs to die in me is any sense that I am innocent.

I am not innocent.

I am complicit in the sins of the world.

I play a part in putting Jesus on the cross.

And what needs to die in me still?

What needs to die in me is any sense that I can sort matters out myself – whether it be homelessness, refugees, Russia or anything else.

I cannot sort things out. I cannot.

And that place of powerlessness is not a comfortable place to be.

No wonder we want to run away.

But I believe – passionately – from the depths of my being that if we can remain present, standing in that costly place that says we cannot turn away, that says we are not innocent, that stops looking to cast judgement on the victims or the perpetrators, or to defend ourselves, and if we can embrace that place that says I cannot solve matters, then we will create a space where Jesus can come in.

And we will catch a glimpse of glory.

‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’

I’ve just started reading a book by the theologian Miroslav Volf.

It’s called ‘Exclusion and Embrace’.

It reflects on the aftermath of the war in the former Yugoslavia and some of the awful things that happened there as community turned on community.

And Volf says: take care with the language of victim and perpetrator, of liberation and freedom.

(Don’t abandon it but take care; such language is not always helpful. It can get in the way, prevent healing.)

And instead Volf says: open your arms wide for the other.

Open them wide.

And then wait. Wait.

May be they will come towards you, may be they won’t.

That’s not in your gift. It could take years.

But if they come towards, embrace them in all their strangeness, their strange customs, their strange clothes, their strange smells, and their strange food.

And then release them.

Don’t hold them in bondage yet again but let them go...as a child of God unique and precious in His sight.

Are we ready to do this at Bristol Cathedral?

Are we ready to embrace the homeless person in our midst or any other stranger in our midst?

Are we willing to do this?

Remember it is a journey where death comes first.

But it is also the path to life, abundant life.

I sense we have drawn close to something precious this week here at Bristol Cathedral.

Let us not turn away.

Let us listen for God's voice in the days ahead.

May we listen to each other, people like us and people not like us, fellow disciples on the road.

And may God give us strength this day and always. Amen.