

John 12.20–33

This Sunday is Passion Sunday, and it marks a change of gear in Lent – and a good moment to get into gear, if like me you've found it hard during lockdown to give things up or get going with new ones. Don't beat yourself up. It's a natural reaction. But do perhaps take a deep breath and let yourself, like the liturgy, start to turn to the Cross.

Our Gospel reading from John jumps ahead a bit in the story to after Palm Sunday, with Jesus teaching in Jerusalem before his arrest, and looking ahead himself to the Cross, so that the Passion theme can be sounded more clearly. We can imagine him perhaps in the Temple precincts with a keen crowd gathered round him, and Jews from all over the world who had started to gather for the Passover jostling for a chance to hear and meet this new prophet.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'

The 'Greeks' John speaks of would have been Greek-speaking Jews, perhaps from somewhere like Alexandria where many were settled. The weather is right for the time of the year.

A voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.

When I was there in spring it thundered too.

The best way of thinking about the passage, though is to see it as John's version of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane – something left out later on. John's special emphasis is to hold together the agony and the glory, sacrifice and salvation. He lets us eavesdrop on Jesus' own inner dialogue as he himself tries to work those two themes through.

'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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.'

Did Jesus actually say this out loud for John to remember? Or is it John's own reconstruction of what Jesus was thinking? We'll never know. But it rings true, and many ancient writers wrote up events in this way, so the distinction is not an important one. It rings true, and it has true and important things for us in it too – about the nature of God and Jesus, and about ourselves.

It is in response to this that Jesus hears the voice from heaven that I mentioned earlier, the one that sounded like thunder:

A voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'

We're taken back to the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration, and to the remarkable relationship that Jesus seems to have had with his heavenly Father throughout his ministry.

Just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Father. People have meant many things by 'God' over the ages, from capricious deities fighting for power to a disembodied philosophical principle to a *Star Wars*-like force to a celestial watchmaker, to a swear word or expletive. Jesus offers us a powerful, personal and convincing alternative: the loving Father of us all whose name as Father was in his mind and on his lips all through his life.

And more than that. Since Jesus also knew, and we believe, that he and the Father were one, God is not only the one who loves us whoever we are and whatever we do and who embraces us in our every predicament, he is also one with us in Jesus inside that predicament, knowing the pain and the frustration and, yes, the not-knowing, just as we do. As what is true of the Son is true of the Father, we can even daringly say that as Jesus goes to the Cross, the Father too is in a way unsure of the outcome, holding his breath, praying even as we pray, even though in another sense such love and such cost was always going to be his way.

A far cry from the impassive, unchanging, remote God of the philosophers, and an image that speaks powerfully to us even today. One of our children remembers how at college a friend said to her that if Jesus always knew he would rise from the dead, there was no real cost, and it did nothing for her. That is not the Jesus we see here.

We can pause for a moment and use Rembrandt's famous painting of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* to help us see both God embracing us as Father in our desperate plight – and God as the writer Henri Nouwen powerfully observed also in the Son, who set out into a far country and knew that plight from the inside like us too. The Son with the shaven head, the dishevelled clothes, the worn-out shoes, on his knees: all of humanity in its poverty, oppression and disease. We bring all those and ourselves among them to the Father now in these times in which we might well feel heaven is again holding its breath ...



We've not quite finished yet though. We've reminded ourselves about some important things we believe about God that can be of real help if we feel low and isolated and frustrated and abandoned during this lockdown and wonder what on earth God is doing. And of the truth that it's OK and even normal for us as humans and Christians to live in this sort of gap, that God in Jesus lived in it too, and that God the Father loves us in it and always will.

But I said at the beginning there are some important truths about us here too; truths about what we could set our sights on as we turn to the Cross ourselves in these next two weeks.

The first is that we can, like Jesus, be in conversation with the Father. That can be in formal liturgy or in informal prayer, a sort of chat while you walk the dog, or a heart-felt grumble while you do the washing up. Do it the way that works for you. Ring home. He'll take the call.

The second is that like the Father and inspired by his unconditional love for us, we can also make the first move, like the Prodigal Son's Father, and reach out to those who need to feel that love from us, whatever state they are in. It's costly, just listening, just loving, but in the strength of God's Spirit we can have a go.

And the third is that, as we hear the voice of love, we can try and find our own voice as Easter approaches to share the truth we have come to know, of how that day revealed God's embrace of love in which we and the whole world are always held.