

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – 2021B

“Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.” They sought Philip out and eagerly beseeched him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Although their entreaty sounds ordinary to our ears, it would not have seemed so to Philip, nor to any other member of Jesus’ band of followers. Most of them were used to thinking of him as **their** rabbi. Many of them had grown up not far from his home in Galilee. Theirs was a thoroughly Jewish milieu. What could these Greeks possibly want with him?

The message works its way up the chain of command to Jesus. It seems to spark something disquieting in him, a sense of foreboding. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” he declares, knowingly.

Most of Jesus’ followers have imagined their little reform movement flourishing solely under the umbrella of Judaism. The presence of these Greek pilgrims seems to remind their Lord that his true mission will soon be played out on a much larger stage: even a cosmic stage.

The next verses are grim. The necessity of seeds falling into the ground and dying before they bear fruit. Losing one’s own life, even hating one’s life, as the hard price of discipleship. The call to resolutely follow him, come what may. “Now my soul is troubled,” Jesus sighs. Unburdening himself of his deepest dread, in language evoking his agony in the garden, in the synoptic gospels, Jesus wonders if he dares pray, “Father, save me from this hour.”

The prayer he does ultimately utter is one not of protest but of steely resignation: “Father, glorify your name.” Notably, he seeks not his own glory, but God’s. Suddenly, as happened at his baptism, and on the Mount of Transfiguration, a voice booms out of the heavens: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” This is no private revelation. The crowd hears it, and wonders.

With an unearthly look in his eye, Jesus declares that the time of the world’s judgment is at hand, and with it the defeat of “the ruler of this world.” Whether he’s speaking of the emperor or of a more spiritual adversary is hard to say. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

John is convinced that the lifting-up part refers to the cross, with Jesus' still-living body writhing upon it. Surely, to the disciples, it's an inscrutable saying. Only later, after the cross and resurrection, will his followers discern the full extent of its dark meaning.

There was a time when a magnetic Jesus, or a crucifix, for those in the Roman Catholic tradition, was a common item in religious bookstores. The little statue of the Savior, his arms extended in blessing, was meant to be placed on the dashboard of a car. Its purpose was reassurance, a reminder of the Lord's caring presence during morning and evening commutes. It's hard to find a magnetic Jesus nowadays, mainly because dashboards are now made of fiberglass or plastic. But old-timers know they used to be a thing.

The real Jesus is magnetic in a different sense. Just by being himself, he draws people towards him. Gossip columnists laud the magnetism of certain movie stars or political leaders. By that, they typically mean a combination of good looks and a winning personality. These fortunate few have "star power." They draw ordinary mortals into their orbit.

Another word used for this sort of superficial attraction is "charisma." It's a religious word at its root, although that's not the sense in which the writers of *People* and *Us Weekly* magazines use it. A *charism*, closely related to *charis*, the Greek word for grace, is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Christian understanding of charisma is far richer.

Jesus Christ, of course, is more than a mere celebrity. What he offers the human race is far more dazzling than mere star power. The story of his life, death and resurrection speaks to our deepest spiritual hungers. The promise of his continued presence, as Holy Spirit, assures us that we are never alone.

Jesus is magnetic in a way similar to those old-fashioned bar magnets that our grade-school science teachers used to explain the physics of magnetism. Remember how, if you placed two of those bar magnets together on a lab table in a certain way, they would fly together to meet each other? And do you remember how, if you spun one magnet around the other way, you could bring the two of them together, but you couldn't make them stay there? As soon as you

let go, one or both of the magnets would go spinning off in the opposite direction, unable to resist the powerful force of magnetic repulsion.

There was something attractive about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, as described a few verses earlier in this very same chapter of John's gospel. That spiritual attraction causes the crowd to cheer. But there's also something repellent about Jesus to those who are as yet unwilling to welcome him into their hearts. "Look," say the scribes and pharisees in amazement, as they see the surging crowd, "the world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). They speak those words not in admiration, but in revulsion. Soon enough, through their schemes, they will turn that world against him, squeezing his lifeblood out upon the stones of Calvary.

Jesus is magnetic still. The crowds who will throng here for Palm Sunday (if conditions permit) may be drawn by the festive scene of children waving palm branches and cheered by rousing hymns, but that's only the half of it. It's the attractive half. This man who lurches awkwardly into Jerusalem on a donkey also has a repellent way about him.

If you lay your ordinary, acquisitive life up against his, if you seek to align your life with his teachings, you may sometimes discover that your own life is spinning around until you're facing the opposite way. It's that power he has, God's power, the power of righteousness, plunged into this world of sin like a hot poker immersed in a vat of water. It's no wonder the principalities and powers crucified him. Once they discovered who he truly is, and what his presence in this world really means, they realigned the repellent poles of their magnet against his by brute force.

"I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." That's spiritual magnetism at work! On the one hand, he repels; but he also attracts. Once the power of his love gets hold of you, there's no resisting. He just brings you along.

At his birth, he attracted shepherds to a Bethlehem hillside, and wise men from afar. In the temple when he was 12 years old, the wise and the learned gathered round to hear his teaching. He called to his side fishermen who left their

nets and tax collectors who abandoned their account books. Even the wise Pharisee, Nicodemus, came to him by night, to learn how to be “born from above.”

He called to his side women of every description, everyone from the practical, no-nonsense Martha to her dreamy sister, Mary. Even the Roman governor, Pilate, felt the pull of his magnetism as he interrogated him. A pity it was that the skeptical Pilate did not give in, then and there, and cease his resistance!

Jesus can do the same thing for you today. Have you felt the pull of his love in your life, calling you out of ungodly habits? Have you experienced the fascination that comes from hearing his story, the timeless story retold by the church in every age? Have you ever turned to him in grief or worry or fear, and discovered at the center of your being a calm and peaceful place, where none of life’s storms can harm you? If so, you’ve felt his magnetism. Very likely, it’s what has drawn you to worship today.

Have you ever seen a magnet at work in a junkyard? It’s an impressive sight. Junkyard owners attach a large electromagnet to the end of a crane. The crane operator swings the magnet way out, over a barren field strewn with the wrecks of automobiles, and the magnet is strong enough to attract every kind of metal that’s worth refining. Everything that’s not attracted, the junkyard owner ships off to be destroyed or buried in a landfill. Everything the magnet has grabbed is saved and put to good use.

There’s one other characteristic of those clunky, old bar magnets, so beloved by science teachers. If you take a magnet that’s powerful enough, and you strap another piece of metal right up against it for a sufficient period of time, that metal, too, becomes a magnet. Somehow the magnetic force leaps the gap, and the other metal bar becomes imbued with the magnet’s power. Then, it too can attract others. It too can invite and guide others to the one source of all attraction.

If we’ve felt the pull of Jesus in our lives, and if we’ve submitted ourselves to his power, we’ll soon discover that our lives become magnetic, too, although,

of course, in a more limited way. His magnetism will work through our own lives to invite others into a saving relationship with him.

With Holy Week coming soon, maybe you've already begun to feel the attraction. Maybe you feel your soul yearning for that saving story of King Jesus, riding on a donkey, then hung from a cross, then bursting forth from the tomb that could not hold him in.

As we move towards our celebration of those world-changing events, know that the entry of the Son of God into human life is not only a matter of teaching, of blessing and of healing, it's also a disturbance. His story reminds us that God still has plans for the world, big plans. Within those plans is our own particular place: the unique duties God is calling us to perform.

You and I can respond to that divine disturbance with hostility and rejection, or we can welcome the Lord as liberator and life-giver. Either way, it's up to us to answer the call. So, walk with the Lord in these final days of Lent. Walk with him not only as he enters the city in bright sunshine, but also as he wades into the shadows. Go with him to dark Gethsemane and beyond. Watch with him, and wonder at this spectacle of God's own Son, arrested, condemned, crucified and risen from the grave!

Deacon Gerry

