

Can we see Jesus Today?

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Witness

Can we “see Jesus” today?

Our bishop, Donald, chose as the theme for the 2010 Synod of the Anglican Network in Canada the verse from John’s Gospel: “Sir, we would see Jesus”, drawn from John 12:21.

This request, made by “some Greeks” who had come to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship, could easily have been granted by the disciples of whom it was asked. They could simply have brought the Greeks who asked the question to Jesus himself. They would have then been able to “see Jesus” right in front of their eyes?

But, two questions? First, what would they have seen? In other words, would they have “seen” in the way that John’s Gospel talks about seeing? Second, in his last appearance to the disciples, Easter evening, the risen Jesus says to Thomas: “do you believe because you have seen? how much more blessed are those who believe without seeing?” So, even if we could see Jesus today, should we want to?

First, John’s Gospel makes it clear that the one we encounter in Jesus is none other than “very God of very God, begotten not made, of being one with the Father, through whom all things were made”. It is not simply an historical man, Jesus of Nazareth, that the believer encounters, though he was a person of history; it is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, who spoke with Moses from the burning bush and announced Himself to Moses as “I am”. When Jesus asks those who have come out to seize him in the garden (John 18), “for whom are you looking?”, and they respond “Jesus of Nazareth”, he responds “I am”. Now, if all he had said was what most translations of John have, “yes, that’s me” or “I am he”, you would not expect the reaction from the Roman soldiers and Temple police that follows: “They fell to the ground”. This is not a reaction to a mere man; this is the reaction, even of ignorant Romans, before the divinely revealed name of God.

In John’s understanding, they “saw”, that is, they got it. If the Greeks who asked to see Jesus ever did get to see Jesus, which we don’t know they did, the question that we would have wanted to pose to them would have been: “so, what did you see?” If they answered: “A great teacher, someone like a Judean Socrates; a charismatic with great power in his eyes”, we would have to say to them: “then you never did get to see Jesus after all”. What they should have said was what the “beloved disciple”, who authors the Gospel of John says: “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14b). If the Greeks did get to see Jesus and then really saw him, that is, they really got who he was, they would have been like those ignorant Romans, those antagonistic Temple police, or like the prophet Isaiah, who, “in the year when King Uzziah died” saw the Lord “high and lifted up”, he falls to the ground, unable to raise his physical eyes to look at the site, and merely exclaims: “Woe is me”. For all of them -- Romans, police, inspired prophet -- could not, dared not, raise their unworthy eyes to the look upon God.

And yet we boldly proclaim that we would see Jesus. How can this be, knowing what we know now about what would happen to us if we were to see Jesus?

Peter Kreeft, who gave the Weston Lecture at Augustine College in 2007, told the following story during his talk.¹ Kreeft spoke of how he had gone to Mass in Boston with one of his students, who was accompanied by a Muslim friend who had asked to attend. After the Mass, Kreeft found the two friends at the back of the church disputing. Kreeft asked his student what the problem was. The student said that, after communion, he had gone back to his pew where the Muslim student was waiting for him. The Muslim student asked him what he had just done. The student, who had simply gotten up from his pew, gone to the center aisle with all the other congregants, gone forward to the front rail, knelt, had taken the bread and the wine, gotten up and come back to his pew, told his friend that he had gone forward to take the bread and the wine. The Muslim friend had asked him: Why? The student, whose name was John, said: because we believe that this is the body of our Lord Jesus, given for us, and the blood of our Lord Jesus, shed for us. The Muslim friend, Isa, responded:

“And you believe that?”

“Yes.”

Isa made as if to say something but stifled it. John assured him he would not be offended.

¹ The essence of the talk has been presented in Kreeft’s “What I learned From a Muslim about Eucharistic Adoration,” *Crisis* 16.11 (March 1998), available at <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0016.html>.

Finally, reluctantly, Isa said, "I don't understand."

"I understand how you feel. It sounds very shocking."

"No, you don't understand. That's not what I mean. You will take it as an insult, but I don't mean it to be."

"I promise I won't take it as an insult. But I really want to know what's on your mind."

"Well then. . . . I don't think you really do believe that. I don't mean to say you're dishonest, but"

"I think I know what you mean. You can't empathize with anyone who believes something so shocking. You don't see how you could ever get down on your knees before that altar."

"No, I don't see how I could ever get up. If I believed that thing that looks like a little round piece of bread was really Allah Himself, I think I would just faint. I would fall at His feet like a dead man."

As Kreeft recounted the story, he said to us: "I realized that the Muslim friend of my student has really gotten it". To put it in our words: he saw.

We, as a diocese, as the Anglican Network in Canada, have asked anew to see Jesus. Let me just say that if we do see Jesus, we must be prepared for the consequences... at the altar rail, in our parish life together, in our families, in our diocese, even in our North American province. For no one can see God and live. But thanks be to God, that in Christ, God takes all that which does die and raises it up to a new and unending life, beyond anything we could ask or imagine, a life in which we shall not only see but gaze upon the fair beauty of our God in all of His fulness for all of eternity.

And this is the one that we, who do not have the privilege of being able to see "Jesus of Nazareth", can thankfully still see in all of His fulness.

But second what about those of us who live not only after Easter but after the Ascension of Jesus? Remember, for 40 days after His resurrection, his disciples saw the risen Jesus. But after that? True, Stephen does (Acts 7:56), but he is one of the few. Saul, who will become Paul, doesn't see Jesus but only hears him speak (Acts 9:4-5). No, after the Ascension, we normally don't "see" Jesus, at least not in the way that Jesus was seen during his earthly ministry and 40-day resurrection appearances.

So, what about the other texts of Scripture, written after the Ascension, that assert that we do "see" Jesus. For example, the letter to the Hebrews suggests that, while we don't see everything yet fulfilled according to God's plan, "we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone". (Heb 2:9 NRSV) Also, the Apocalypse of John (also known as "Revelation") gives us, through John's eyes, an extended heavenly vision of the Alpha and Omega, the conquering lamb.

These passages suggest the same kind of seeing as the Gospel of John does when it talks about really seeing. We can see Jesus, just not with the physical eyes. John's Gospel constantly warns the reader against trying to limit what s/he sees to what can be seen with one's physical eyes. Speaking to those who would judge him by what they see with their eyes Jesus says: "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24).

And the result? As in the case of Isaiah's vision of the Lord "high and lifted up", you should know that when you really do see, as Stephen did, the risen Son of Man, "high and lifted up", you must be prepared to die! Remember, the request from the Greeks in John to "see Jesus" leads Jesus to begin to talk about his imminent death.

But, you say, that was Jesus, not the Greeks. They did not die when they saw him, if in fact they did in fact see him. But, consistent with the rest of the Scriptures, if they did see Him, and I mean really saw Him, even as the writer of John says -- "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) -- could they possibly have remained the same as they were? If they truly looked not just on the "Jesus of history" but gazed upon God Himself incarnate in the person of Jesus, then surely they could not have lived, at least not as they had been. Look at the experience of Isaiah. He sees the Lord and he then exclaims: "Woe is me". He realizes his unworthiness. True unworthiness, not a rote repetition of how unworthy we are, is expressed in an ability to raise one's eyes to the heavenly vision and is often pictured in the image of one falling prostrate on the floor.

So, an answer to the request “Where or how can we see Jesus today?” starts by asking two slightly different questions: “Are you prepared to see Jesus where He wishes you to find Him?” and “Are you really prepared to see what you will see when you do see Him?”

Where does He wish us to look for Him?

(1) Individual and corporate prayer, especially the Eucharist

Jesus is seen individually in prayer, but it is collectively that the people of our Lord gather together.

He is seen in the praises of His people.

(2) Mission

In John 12:20 the Greeks come to Jesus’ disciples asking to “see Jesus”. Why? Because the Greeks know that the disciples will know where Jesus is and, they hope, will bring the Greeks to him.

Today, there are many in the world who desperately want Jesus, whether they know it or not, and openly or in a somewhat embarrassed way, ask Jesus disciples to bring them to him. There are others in the world who know nothing of Jesus. They may know some Christians, but they think of them as just “religious people”, not disciples who could introduce them to a life-changing saviour.

Have you brought anyone to “see Jesus”? This is a different question than the one that is sometimes asked: “Have you led anyone to faith?” Faith is a work of God and it must be in and through Christ, but unless a person is brought to Christ that person has very little ...²

All that we know about Jesus, incarnate, risen, ascended and reigning, is that He was, is, and always will be about the salvation of the world. He has always thus been identified with mission and seen on the mission to redeem the world.

Likewise, his followers. The men and women found in prayer in the Acts of the Apostles are men and women who are on mission, whether they have chosen it of their own accord, or whether they are impelled to it by God (when they are driven into the world on Pentecost) or by persecution (when they are driven to “Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth” after the death of Stephen). As we know from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus spends most of his time “on the road” (Luke 9:51 - 19: __); in Acts, likewise, His people are “on the road”. Not surprisingly, the two disciples who doubt the resurrection meet and “see” Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

If we are to see Jesus, we cannot simply expect to form a “holy huddle” and work ourselves into a mystic frenzy. Our Lord expects us to follow him, and as we do, on the way to the cross, he has assured us that he will be with us. The experience of the church suggests that it is then that we shall see him.

(3) “Beatific vision”

There is one time when, of necessity, all of us are invited to see Jesus on our own: our death. While Jesus died for us, taking our sin into death so that we might no longer be subject to the fate of a death with no hope and issue, all of us die physically. And we do so individually, even if not alone. When then we “cross the verge of Jordan”, it is as individuals that we are as those who are born again in Christ given a vision of the risen Lord Jesus awaiting us on the other shore. It is this vision that was called the “beatific vision” in a prior age. While some mystics may have had it while in life -- and it certainly is not limited to the point of death, since those of us who are in Christ have been given abundant life and have it now (__) -- for the majority of Christians our vision is only sharp enough to see the One who has always been there for us when the eyes of our flesh are stripped from us and we have nothing left to cling to ... in death. Then, we see what we could always have seen were we to have looked truly with the eyes of faith.

And what we see is not “what” but “whom”. For we do see Jesus, no longer bound by the constraints of the flesh as we have been throughout our life, but high and lifted up. And, in mercy and in grace, He lifts us up to be with Him and to enjoy the fulness of His beauty, in the presence of His Father and the Holy Spirit, for all eternity. It will not only satisfy us but will overwhelm us to see, and we shall never grow weary of looking.

Today, in churches dominated by the liberal Protestant despair of ever encountering the living God, but hesitant to give up on the

² In his commentary on John 12:20, Rudolf Bultmann, who is much more orthodox than most conservatives give him credit for, stressed that access by the Greek world to Jesus happens through the apostles (specifically Philip and Andrew); there is no direct and immediate access by “the Greeks” to Jesus (Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; ed. Rupert William Noel. Hoare; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 423). What this means for me in my ministry as an ordained scholar (rather than as an ordained parish priest) is a fundamental awareness that access of the academic world (often understood to be “the wisdom of the Greeks”) to the Word made flesh happens through the successors to the apostles, among which I am honoured to count myself, along with my brothers in the ordained ministry of Christ’s Holy Catholic Church.

symbols of our faith, some theologians, poets, and hymn writers have emphasized that Jesus can indeed be seen ... in our neighbour, in the person next to us in the pew, in the person on the street, even especially in the homeless and despairing. This view builds not only on the theological view, planted some 200 years ago, and now having taken root, that God can only be known in the world in which we live, and also on a widespread use of a mistaken exegesis of passages like Matthew 25:31-46.³

As is clear, if we ask to see Jesus, and if we then do see Jesus, we must prepared for the consequences, for no one can see God and live. But thanks be to God, that in Christ, God takes that which dies and raises it up to a new and unending life, in which we shall gaze upon the beauty of our God for all eternity.

³ In this well-known passage Jesus prophesies the separation of the “sheep” and the “goats”, ‘code words’ for two different groups of people who are identified as “sheep” or “goats” based on their treatment of the “little ones”: ‘as you have done to the least of these, so you have done to me’. The mistaken exegesis that I refer to arises in taking the diminutive “least of these” in a paternalistic way to identify “least of these” as socially or economically deprived people. There is no justification for taking the phrase this way anywhere in the Gospel of Matthew. In contrast, there is clear support for understanding the phrase used here in light of Jesus’ earlier words in Matthew to describe the “little ones” (Matt 10:42), which refers to the apostles of Jesus who are involved in the proclamation of the gospel and who, as is clear from the rest of Matthew 10 are told that they will experience the very kind of deprivation, rejection, and persecution that is ultimately referred to and is judged in Matthew 25. (The only other use of the phrase is found in Matthew 18 [specifically vss. 6, 10, and 14] where it probably means children who, in their complete simplicity, believe in Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel, little children are shown to be like the apostles of Jesus, who have given up everything to follow Jesus, in that they receive Jesus with no view to what they can gain from him materially.) Children, however, are not the ones in view in Matthew 25, which clearly identifies householders and members of households able to give material comfort. The material comfort that they give, however, is not intended as a kind of social charity but to support Jesus’ apostolic emissaries. If they do so, they are considered “sheep” who will lie down in abundant pasture; if they do not, they will be considered “goats” and thus not part of the “flock”.