

John 23:20. Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

I had a good visit with baby Harry talking about his baptism. His Mum and Dad and his big sister were there. When we had discussed the questions that Tom and Katrina would be asked, and spoken a little about the meaning of baptism' and everyone was confident that they knew what would be happening this morning, Tom suddenly asked me "What will you be preaching about on Sunday?" It was only Tuesday night, and I dislike talking about sermon ideas before they become sermons, and my thoughts were pretty vague. But I could hardly say "Mind your own business!" So I explained that the set passage of the day was a story about some Greeks coming to the disciples asking to see Jesus. Tom asked "Who were these Greeks? Why were they there?" And in that moment, I had the sermon!

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." Maybe they were just visitors. The ancient Greeks were great travellers. Far up the Nile in Egypt today there stands a great Egyptian statue on which a Greek tourist in ancient times had scratched his name just as modern tourists do. There is a poem about one of the heroes of the Trojan war, Ulysses, old and weak but desperate for one more sail:

*I cannot rest from travel
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known
That's the Greek spirit.*

But these Greeks were no just ordinary tourists. They were religious tourists. It says that they had come to Jerusalem at the time of the passover to worship. We don't know about their religion: but they were interested in religion. They had been wanting to see the celebrations of the great Festival. Maybe they had been at the Temple a day or two before when Jesus over-

turned the tables and drove out the money-changers. Maybe they had heard the gossip about him. They were tourists, interested in religion, and they would like to see Jesus. There might be people here this morning just like that.

What would passers-by with a vague interest in religion see of Jesus in Morningside Parish church this morning? Would the baptism of Harry hint at something of the care of Jesus for the weak and vulnerable? Would a hymn about taking Christ Jesus as my friend give a sense of the simplicity of following Jesus? What would the welcome offered here to passing visitors show them about Jesus?

They weren't just any religious tourists, mind you. These were Greeks. The story specifically says so. These were people with an extraordinary heritage. Poetry, philosophy, drama, religion, architecture, politics. Greek children drank in with their mothers' milk questions about the meaning of life. Greek conversation was as likely to be about the nature of truth as how to catch fish. These visitors to Jerusalem are likely to have been men (almost certainly men) with enquiring minds and hearts which had been exposed to a great range of emotions. They had sat – metaphorically at least – at the feet of Socrates, who is supposed to have taught *By all means, marry. If you get a good wife, you will be happy. If you get a bad one, you will be a philosopher.* And they had sat – literally- at the plays of Euripides, whose best songs are almost incomparable in their power and beauty.

What a conversation it would have been if in fact that kind of visitor did find his way to Jesus. Especially since they appear in John's gospel, where Jesus appears at his most philosophical. For Jesus in John's gospel goes very deep indeed. Think of the passage, of which part is often read at communion services, where he calls himself the bread of life. How deep is this? How much digging does this need to get to the heart of it
For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty

How much rich food is there for those who love to wrestle with the meaning of life.

But it is not just philosophy. For among those Greeks would be those who had been bruised and broken by life and had shared together the great reflections on suffering of the ancient dramas. What if they were to find Jesus and hear him speak of suffering and his own suffering? That is exactly what happens in the gospel story. Immediately after the Greeks appear Jesus speaks of his own suffering and death.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.

It is strong meat. Don't you think that too much of today's Christianity is too simplistic, too naïve, too blind to the depths of the world's suffering and the struggles of believing. Sometimes I think our religion has taken on the triviality of the contemporary celebrity culture. Some of the modern worship songs. Some of the comfortable prosperity gospel messages of tv preachers. Don't you sometimes long for a Christianity which deals with life as we really experience it. Last year I was at a seminar for trainee ministers and I was asked to name a book that every preacher should read. I named Shakespeare's "Othello".

These Greeks were tourists. They were deep thinkers. But only now do we come to their primary meaning in the story. What it means in the Bible when it says that they were Greeks is that they were outsiders. They were not Jews. They were – to use the old word – Gentiles. And they were visiting a community that was dangerously exclusivist. There are wonderful, passionate denunciations of racism and exclusivism in the Bible: but there is also an undercurrent of superiority which, by the time of Jesus, had developed into something nasty and indeed sinister. White western Christians have imbibed enough racism over the centuries to be ashamed: but they have also seen enough of the effects of racism throughout the last century and up to the present moment to recognise that it is fundamentally

and completely opposed to the spirit of the all-loving God and the all-embracing gospel.

It was to become the great struggle of the first Christians: and it has its beginnings here. Was the grace of God only for Jewish people and Jewish Christians – or might it be for everyone. These Greeks appear here in the story and they are the outsiders, the non-Jews, the ones who don't fit in. For every one of the original readers of the gospel that is who they are and that is what they represent. They come looking for Jesus and – and what happens next?

Would you believe it? – we don't know! Incredibly the story does not tell us if they ever did see him. The story goes *Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."*

These Greeks, whom we have been following all morning, are never mentioned again! Extraordinary.

But what do you make of this? Jesus is told that the Greeks are looking for him and immediately says "Now is the Son of Man glorified". Could it just be that the gospel writer – and remember he is the most subtle writer in the history of Christianity – want us to understand that the very moment that outsiders appear in the story of Jesus is the very moment when the glory of God begins to be revealed? Could it be that the opportunity for Gentiles, foreigners, misfits – the opportunity for the poorest and the most vulnerable, the outcasts and untouchables - to see Jesus is the very moment when the true nature of the unlimited, unconditional, all embracing love of God begins to be shown to all the world.

Which is exactly what the baptism of Harry has been about.