



Lent 5, Year B – March 29, 2009

John 12:20-33

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

John's Gospel today serves as a foreword to the events of Christ's last days. It suggests what is going to happen – Christ will be lifted up...literally. Hoisted up off the ground on a cross. Much has been said about the crucifixion of Christ and what it means and how one might respond. And the Gospel of John contributes a compelling understanding of that event, one that does, indeed, call for a response, a response involving a choice, and a choice involving a challenge.

For John, the crucifixion is not a stand alone event. Indeed, in first century Jerusalem, the crucifixion of a purported political criminal would have been something of a non-event. Those who threatened the established order were crucified routinely by the Romans. But a crucifixion preceded by a life like that of Christ and followed by the resurrection was an event of historical proportion. Indeed, it was world-changing.

Thus, Christ's crucifixion was an event that drew its full meaning only in conjunction with the life and resurrection of Christ. One could not view Christ's life, or Christ's death, or Christ's resurrection in isolation. The true meaning of these events could be understood only in considering them as a seamless whole. In this totality of events, not in the cross alone, the salvation of the world was effected. It is not in a single act of unspeakable violence, but in a story of unimaginable love, of love of Christ for the Father and the Father for Christ. And of God's love for the world. All the world. Everyone in the world. These events, life, death, resurrection, the story of the divine walking among us, reveal the power and promise of God's love for the world.

And the world is called to respond to that love. We can choose. We must choose. We do choose – between our self-serving norms and values and Jesus' model of unselfish love. And when we free ourselves from service to self, we take a giant step toward the vision of discipleship portrayed in the Gospel of John. We look outward. To others. We begin to live in true community. When the grain of wheat dies, it does not produce one stalk; it bears much fruit. It bears a community of the faithful that is called upon to realize the salvation of the world in Christ.

Why a community? Can we not be satisfied with faith, piety, and works on an individual basis? What we must remember is that love can be expressed only in relationship. Never in isolation. This is why John's Gospel places such emphasis on the loving relationship between the Father and the Son.

At the same time, we cannot deny the practical wisdom – no doubt reflecting God's greater wisdom – of undertaking the work of salvation in community. How much more can we accomplish when we work together. In community we can call upon a variety of individual gifts, talents, and skills. Our various skills supplement and complement each other. None of us wastes effort doing things that we do not do well. All of us contribute our best efforts. And God's work is done.

In a similar vein, discipleship as community enables us to compensate for the foibles and shortcomings of our colleagues. As we have gifts that contribute, all of us have flaws that might impede or imperil our work in community. A community can remind us to get beyond ourselves or pick up the slack occasioned by our shortcomings.

Community also means diversity. Only in community are we challenged to love those who are different, who share no particular affinities with us. Thus, we enhance our ability to reach out in love to those who are other. And the work of salvation extends more broadly into the world.

Diversity in community also provides the benefit of multiple perspectives and viewpoints. In our Anglican tradition of intellectual freedom, we come to understandings of God and righteousness through conversation and even debate. In community, we can begin to hear in the formation of consensus what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. This formation of consensus (not the same as a majority vote, by the way), this formation of consensus on matters theological and ethical is highly significant and essential to the church, whether defined as the Anglican church or the broader church of all baptised Christians. Along with scripture, tradition, and reason, though perhaps to a lesser extent, this so-called consensus fidelium contributes to the understanding and development of our faith and our calls. As the Lambeth Conference has observed, the consensus fidelium is "the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through [its] faithful people in the Church." Thus, the voice of the spirit is most accurately heard in community.

Finally, in community, we give and receive our support and encouragement to others. Recall that at Baptisms, weddings, and ordinations, we call on the congregation, the community, to promise its support the newly-baptised, the newly married, and the newly ordained. In community, we will never be left alone to fend for ourselves.

Thus, in community, we join together to do God's work as we were intended to do it. This is the path to salvation envisioned in the Gospel of John. This is the path to salvation that will beckon us again as we participate as community in the liturgies of Holy Week and Easter. We will recall those events that changed the destiny of the world and confronted us with a love that knows no comparison. May we make the right choice and take on the challenge: To accept God's great offer of salvation by working as disciples in community to realize God's salvation of the world around us. Amen.