

This is our last look at John for a few weeks because next week is the first week in advent. During December we'll be thinking about:

Dec 3: The miracle of the moment – the time was just right

Dec 10: The miracle of the message – it's great news for everyone

Dec 17: The miracle of the method – it's not what you'd expect

Dec 24: The miracle of the manger – God with us!

It won't be long until there are chocolate eggs in the shops – a sure sign that it's three months to Easter time. Seeing people wandering round in the dark dressed as witches or superheroes you would know it's Halloween. But if you went to sleep one night and woke up to discover everyone eating chocolate eggs from stockings full of other gifts you might be a bit confused. That's what happened on the day Jesus came into Jerusalem.

It was Passover time: the great spring festival at the heart of Jewish life. It was a memory of the Exodus, the time God set his people free from slavery in Egypt, through the sacrifice of the lamb. Passover had its own symbolism and John wants to make sure that we know how Jesus, the Lamb of God, fits into that. Thinking back to chapter 10:22 we see Jesus at the winter festival, Hanukkah. Judas Maccabaeus cleansed the Temple in 164 BC and his followers entered the city waving palm branches.

John is telling us that Jesus is bringing together Hanukkah and Passover – Jesus is the true King, come to claim his throne, and that this was the moment when God would free Israel once and for all.

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Confirms the point.

This follows on from the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead – John says this was the last of the signs Jesus performed in his public

ministry; but it was the one that meant a large crowd went with him to Jerusalem.

The Pharisees, the very religious people, spoke with contempt about the crowd, just as they had done earlier. But John wants us to hear something else as well; Jesus came into the world because God loved it so much (3:16); he has other sheep to find and rescue as well as the lost sheep of Israel (10:16); his death will deliver children of God all over the world (11:52). It's not an accident that immediately after this contempt by the Pharisees some foreigners approach the disciples, wanting to see Jesus. Jesus sees this as a sign that the moment is fast approaching when he will complete his work. John 12:32 *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*

Each of us belongs in a world there are so many who have never heard of Jesus. They approach Christmas but have never discovered that he is the true King, the true rescuer, the bringer of freedom, Emmanuel – God with us. They need to hear that message, and it's up to us to deliver it.

The foreigners come to Andrew and Philip – the two most likely to be talking about Jesus (ch 1) – instead of welcoming them though, Jesus goes off into a story about seeds and life and death. The fullest answer is from verse 32 *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*

In other words, if the foreigners want to see him and benefit fully from what he has come to do, his best response is not to be side-tracked but to complete the work his father has given him. Only by completing his work can they, and we, gain the truest and deepest access to God. They will not just see him, but would be drawn to him in a powerful way and receive new life.

So, Jesus talk of seeds dying is actually the start on his answer. John is saying more clearly than before how God will save the world through the death of Jesus – he has hinted at it often. Jesus' death will be like sowing a seed into the ground. It will look like a tragedy but it will, actually, be a triumph of God's self-giving love. The love that

looks death in the face and defeats it by meeting it voluntarily, on behalf of the whole world, the world represented by these foreigners.

John 2:4 My time hasn't come yet says Jesus to Mary. John 7:30 nobody arrested him because his time had not come. John 12:23 *Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'*

The moment for love and final liberation has arrived, and the fact that foreigners have arrived in Jerusalem asking for him, shows Jesus that the time has come. Jesus will go forward to meet the moment with symbolic actions (ch 13), special teaching (ch 14-16) and incredible prayer (ch 17).

But Jesus is not just talking about himself – of course his death is unique, standing alone against the power of sin and death so that the rest of us won't have to. But he is also pioneering a way which his followers must also take. Perhaps the challenge to the foreigners is that if they really want to 'see' him, to get to know him and understand what he's about for themselves, they must get ready to be 'planted' in the same way, to risk everything in his service. Romans 6:4 *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

Then we come to a section where the audible voice of God is heard. Some people thought it was thunder. Some thought that because Jesus had just been praying an angel was answering him. John seems to be the only one who says it was God. Of course, we can't prove that and the really important thing is to see what was said.

Jesus had just said that his time had come. He had been waiting for this moment. Everything has been building up to it - and here it was. And he was...

Proud that he'd made it this far? No.

Exhilarated? Yes, it seems so, but that's not the first thing John says. Jesus is troubled. It is amazing to think that the Word become flesh, the one in whom the Father's love and power had been clearly seen, the one who healed the sick, turned water into wine, opened blind

eyes and raised Lazarus from death was troubled. Is your picture of God big enough for that?

Jesus was the word become flesh. Weak, human flesh. Flesh that shrank from suffering as we might. His natural inclination was to think, ‘the time is here. How can I avoid it?’ The other gospels don’t show this side of Jesus until we get to Gethsemane, much later. The key is the glory of the father and the way Jesus was totally committed to doing whatever was necessary to bring that glory about. His troubled heart knows there is danger ahead, but also knows that it is through that danger, rather than avoiding it, that glory will shine out to the world. John 12:28 *Father, glorify your name!*

That is the prayer the father responds to – and always responds to. He will glorify his name: because those who have stood against him and usurped his rule in the world, who have trampled the poor while exalting themselves are going to be condemned. Lots of people were expecting talk of insurrection, uprising and battle. Jesus is not that sort of king. He was aiming to overthrow the kingdom of the world and replace it with the kingdom of God, but it would not happen in the way people expected it.

This victory had roots back in the history of Israel. During their travels in the wilderness the people complain against God and Moses. God punishes them by sending poisonous snakes into the camp. In Numbers 21:8-9 *The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.*

There is also a clue earlier in John 3:14-15 *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*

When the Israelites were bitten by a snake they had a choice – do nothing and die, or look at the bronze snake and live. They had to choose. That didn’t mean they couldn’t be bitten again. Even today we have a choice to make. We are poisoned by sin we can do nothing and die without God, or we can have faith in Christ and live. That is

only possible because Jesus was 'lifted up' on the cross and died for us.

Jesus' hearers don't understand what he's saying. They know that the Messiah, the Saviour, will reign for ever, so they don't understand why Jesus would talk about dying. I think that John wants us to feel Jesus' frustration because the people seem so close yet so far away; but he also wants us to sense the confusion of the disciples. What did Jesus mean? What was he up to?

The only clue he gives is to speak about light and dark. The light is with them for a little while longer and they must walk as children of the light. So must we, but the difference is we always have Holy Spirit to guide us. This side of the resurrection things not only look different, they are different. We can understand what Jesus was saying; we know he died, and that he rose again. We know that the church is growing all over the world and we are part of that world-wide body of believers, striving to serve God in this place he has put us, with the time, talent and gifting he has given us. We have our part to play in building God's kingdom – let's give him our best.