

The whole wide world**John 12: 20 – 36**

When I was a boy, I couldn't wait for Christmas to come. My brother and I would count down the days and couldn't believe how slowly time went by. We got pumped up with excitement till we thought we'd burst. After all these years, I still remember the mounting excitement of those times of waiting so clearly. It was exactly the same as we counted the days down to our wedding; and again through the three periods of gestation that produced Tim, Jon and Ruth; and as we contemplated our first visit home after four hard years in Haiti. Waiting for something we knew was coming, for something we couldn't hasten along, something we were eager for, desperate for – it strained our patience to the limit.

Something like that happens whenever I go to the theatre. The crowd thickens in the waiting areas. Drinks are bought, conversation mounts, there are a million quick visits to the toilet, warning bells announce the imminence of the performance, a pressing throng filters magically into neat queues, there's a hasty search for seat numbers, we squeeze past people awkwardly posed to let us by and, finally, we're in our places and ready for the off. You can almost feel anticipation hanging in the air. The lights dim, the curtain rises and the drama unfolds. We're away.

A similar sense of excitement has been built up by St John as he presents the drama of Jesus' life. When the bubble of expectation finally burst, his friends must have been agog with waiting. His declaration that "The hour has come" was the culmination of a series of events; it was a moment long promised and keenly awaited. Something his friends were eager for, desperate for, could now happen. The lights dimmed, the curtain rose and the drama could now unfold.

But let's go back to Act One, Scene One, in this tale. Remember the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee? Everyone was having a jolly good time when, horror of horrors, the wine ran out. Mary turned to her son, knowing he was destined for great things and invested with great powers, and asked him if he could do something to ease the crisis. In a word, could he turn some large containers of water into wine. Some ask! Jesus gave her short shrift. "Woman," he said, "my hour has not yet come."

Wrong time, wrong place. The hour of Jesus is not going to be announced at a family party or even a community event. It needs a larger stage.

And that should be remembered in our own day. Too often, especially in times when our faith is being marginalised and our churches are in decline, we are tempted to turn our backs on the bigger world and domesticate our worship and our fellowship. That may satisfy us, it may console us and even excite us, but it will carry little possibility of attracting others. The story of Jesus was never meant simply as an opiate for people who've given up on addressing the needs of the world around them.

And so the tale moves on with Jesus breaking out of his native Galilee and beginning to make an impact on a wider public. He's even being spoken about in Jerusalem, the capital city; and not always with approval either. He's getting under the skin of the people in authority. They'd like to find a way to silence him. Jesus visits Jerusalem on a public holiday – they're celebrating the Festival of Booths, a time for remembering the years when the people were obliged to make temporary dwellings for themselves as they fled from slavery in Egypt. The gossip about Jesus is beginning to alarm his friends and they urge him to show his critics just what he's made of. Once again, however, Jesus resists. His hour, he says, has not yet come.

Again it's the wrong time. A Jewish festival and a Jewish audience, even at a festival time, were not going to provide the right occasion. An even larger stage was needed.

Once again, there's a warning implicit in this incident. How often have the various churches across the land given the impression that they (and they alone) offer an adequate platform for the full drama of our salvation to be played out? In the 19th and early 20th centuries, you could live your entire life within a Methodist sub-culture. You could find your entertainment, your social networks, your cultural needs, your eventual partners – all within the bounds of Methodism. You could be hatched, matched and despatched methodistically and without taint from any other church. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics and the Orthodox were doing the same thing. But the story of Jesus cannot be contained by any one of these bodies. It is bigger than all of them. Indeed, bigger than all of them put together.

So the local and even the national levels have already been ruled out as too limiting for the unveiling of the Jesus programme in its fullest sense. And that

brings us back again to Jerusalem. Once again there's a festival going on but this time it's the biggest one of them all – it's Passover time when the people remembered the way the angel of death passed over the Jewish households and made it possible for them to find their way out of bondage in Egypt and into a future where they'd be free. The biggest feast of them all. The city would be heaving; people would have come from all over the place on pilgrimage. So surely now the stage is set for the great announcement? Almost. There's one little detail left to be declared. What exactly might that be? Surely you can't get bigger or better than this?

I once made Hungarian goulash for my beloved! I remember how the recipe advised a dollop of sour cream to be added at the very last moment.

It was the presence of Greeks, announced at the very last moment, that made that recipe complete too. Now at last Jesus could make his declaration. "The hour is come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Just imagine. Those Greeks turn out to be the missing ingredient. With them present, the story can now move to its dénouement.

There's some simple arithmetic to do before we go on. The word "Greeks," in addition to its obvious meaning (the inhabitants of Greece) can just as easily be taken to mean "non-Jews" or "Gentiles." And that we're left with a simple equation: Jews + Greeks = the whole inhabited world. That is, the message of Jesus was awaiting this dramatic moment when representatives of the whole, wide world were present. For his message is universal; his is a genuinely global brand. He offers a radically new way to understand the human predicament and to break out of all that confines the human spirit. And it's an offer made to anyone and everyone who will avail themselves of it.

But wait. A word of caution. There's a price to pay for the moment of "glory" that's on offer. "Unless a grain of wheat should fall into the ground and die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Somehow, it's by losing our love of life that we'll acquire the benefits of this offer. Paradoxical? I suppose so but, if you look hard enough, there's a real point being made here, a radical new way of looking at human existence is being put forward. Let me try to unpack that.

How many times have I spoken about the way human beings are at the mercy either of their biology or the fashion of the day? Let's look at these one at a time.

Our biology first. Our “selfish gene” and the processes of evolution ensure that we experience life as struggle. Our very survival depends on our being stronger than others. Natural selection favours the strong. In the law of the jungle it’s the fittest who survive. So we are genetically pre-disposed (sometimes with others, often alone) to fight for our rights and to see others as opponents. This is what nature imposes on us. These are forces that hold us tightly within their grasp. Prometheus is bound. But he can know that there is another way:

*To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy Power, which seems infinite;
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great, and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.* [Shelley]

We can break free even from our instinctual drives and our genetic conditioning.

And then there’s fashion and culture. The pitch of advertisers so often urges us to take more and more sumptuous holidays; to beautify ourselves and protect ourselves from ageing or losing our allure; to keep up with the Joneses; to dress in the latest gear – we are subjected to an endless and uncompromising set of unrealisable possibilities (or are they temptations?). We somehow find ourselves obliged to keep in step with others and not to be seen as fuddy-duddies. It’s expensive but who cares? We’re prisoners of our own desires. What to do? Well, once again, there is another way.

We can break free. We can break out of these prisons if we find the secret of love, the secret of a love that flourishes only when we focus on the well-being of others rather than the gratification of our own desires. An old song I used to sing in Sunday School sums it up for me: “Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky’s great novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is a sermon on this very theme. In fact, it begins with the very words used by Jesus in our Biblical passage today: “Except a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit.” The central drama of the novel

lies in the tension between two brothers who represent each side of Russia's bi-polar character. Ivan looks towards Europe for his inspiration – modernising, industrial, capitalist, efficient, Protestant, Europe. His older brother Dmitri looks in the opposite direction – mother Russia, old traditions, Slavic culture. They are at odds with each other. There's a third brother, the youngest, named Aloysius. He seems able to have a good relationship with both Ivan and Dmitri and, interestingly, he spends a significant part of his life in a monastery with an old priest named Zosima. It's there that he learns the secret that both his brothers need also to learn – that the most important thing in life is love and that the hard economic decisions of the one brother and the stubborn cultural adherence of the other need, both of them, to be undergirded by compassion and an interest in the common good.

I have come, said Jesus, to draw all people to myself.

With such rich fare on offer, how on earth can we refuse.

God help us.

Amen.