Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

Today’s gospel reading is another example of this sort of straight talk from Jesus. In the Gospel of John it comes right after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He and his disciples have come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage for the Passover festival; outside the city, Jesus has climbed on the back of a donkey and ridden in procession through the gates like a king coming into his capital, with his disciples waving palm branches and the crowd cheering and shouting “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!” (John 12:13). It must have been an impressive sight, and the enemies of Jesus found it really discouraging; they said to each other, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” (12:19).

And so we come to today’s gospel, which begins with these words: ‘Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks’ (12:20). What were Greeks doing there? Passover was a Jewish festival, celebrating the ancient story of how God had set the people free from slavery in Egypt, led them through the Red Sea under Moses, and defeated the Egyptians who tried to follow them. It was the most nationalistic of all Jewish festivals; in this story, Gentiles were the enemy, and you wouldn’t expect Gentiles to come as pilgrims to participate in it.

But in fact, all over the Mediterranean world in New Testament times, there were little pockets of Gentiles – Greeks and Romans – who had been attracted to the religion of Israel. Presumably they had become disillusioned with the traditional worship of the Greek and Roman gods; what they were experiencing in those religions was no longer satisfying them, and they hungered for something more. In the religion of Israel they found the story of one great Creator God who wanted his people not only to worship him but also to live a moral and ethical life, and many of them were attracted to this story. And so they adopted the Jewish religion, joined in the worship of the synagogues, and tried to follow the commandments – without going all the way and being circumcised, which for obvious reasons was a bit of a challenge to them! These people were known in New Testament times as ‘God-fearers’, and they were fertile ground for the Christian message as the missionaries took it out into the Gentile world.

I think we live in similar times today. For generations now, our society has been offering traditional idols for our worship and satisfaction. Advertisers have been telling us that if we just buy their products, we will be happy and healthy and young forever. Politicians have been promising that if we just elect them they will build the new Jerusalem in our country and we’ll all be happy together. National leaders have demanded our allegiance and support and told us that we’re either for them or for their enemies. We’ve been sold a bill of goods, which tells us that if we just worship the idols of money and possessions or fame or success or beauty or youth or popularity, we’ll find the satisfaction we’re looking for. But we haven’t found it, and more and more people are beginning to question the materialistic assumptions of our society. More and more people are looking for a spiritual dimension to their lives. More and more people are looking for God. They may not be ready to join an organised church or go forward to receive communion, but they are coming to believe, deep down inside, that without God there are no ultimate answers to the questions they are struggling with.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in 1945, once said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die”. That’s exactly right. Follow Jesus’ reasoning with me here:

He starts by telling the crowd what’s ahead for him. It sounds good: he says in verse 22, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”. But then as he goes on, we become uncomfortably aware that he has a different definition of glory than we do; his glory is all bound up with his suffering. He uses the illustration of a grain of wheat falling into the ground. It looks as if the farmer is throwing it away; it falls into the soil and is buried there, which is a kind of death; you think that’s the end of it. But a few days later a shoot springs up, and then a plant, and the plant begins to bear fruit, and suddenly the grain of wheat that died has multiplied.

Jesus is taking about himself and his death on the Cross. He’s going to be rejected by the very people he came to save, and it looks like the end of his story. The world has thrown him away and buried him. But three days later a new resurrection shoot will begin to appear, and then the message will go out, and people will begin to turn to him. In verses 32-33 Jesus says, ‘“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”. He said this’, says John, ‘to indicate the kind of death he was to die’.

So there is good news in the Cross, but there’s also challenge, and Jesus wants to be up front with this challenge to the Greek God-fearers who are contemplating the possibility of following him. And so in verses 25-26 he says, “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour”.

The one who called people to love their enemies and do good to those who hated them did just that himself, accepting the worst that the world could do to him and responding with forgiveness and grace, not anger and vengeance. The one who called people to trust God did just that himself, trusting that if he allowed himself to fall into the ground like a grain of wheat, the Father would not allow him to be trodden underfoot and forgotten. And so it was; the Father raised him from the dead, an act that galvanized his followers to spread the good news of his victory all over the world. Today, two thousand years later, we are still telling the story – glory indeed.

Are you a spiritual seeker, like those Greeks who wanted to see Jesus? Are you looking for something more than what the materialistic world has to offer, and are you beginning to think Jesus might have some answers?

Yes, it is gloriously possible to know him, even today, and to know God through him, but it won’t be an easy road. It’s not just about discussing a book of self-help wisdom over a comfortable latté at Starbucks! There will come a point in our spiritual search when action is called for – and unless we are willing to accept that challenge and act on it, no further progress will be possible. And the action means a willingness to die to self – to take self out of the centre of our lives and put God in his rightful place, and then to humbly live for him and his will, embracing the suffering that comes our way as a result. Jesus says that those who are willing to do that will find life in the midst of death. They will gradually find a new light dawning in their lives – the light of Christ himself. As we follow him, we will indeed discover that he is with us on the journey, and as he says in verse 36, we will indeed become ‘children of the light’.