

## **'My hour has not yet come' – Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

We have all become good at understanding the transmission of a small infective particle in a population. We talk about the R number and exponential rise - although for most of us I think it is simply a question of being aware that if you have a high number of infected people in a small space there will be rapid transmission and spread of the disease.

Information is disseminated in the same way. Gossip travels quickly. The Roman roads of the 1st century were analogous to the internet in the 21st. For the transmission of official information, couriers changing horses at staging posts up to 8 times a day could travel at up to 100 miles a day carrying news from Rome as far north as Hadrian's wall. And where news of a great victory travelled, other news would piggyback - news of a miracle-working prophet in Jerusalem who spoke of the God of the Jews in a new way, or later rumours of his resurrection.

So it's not surprising that Greek Jews coming into Jerusalem for Passover had heard of Jesus of Nazareth and wanted to see him. For Christ, their request marked a watershed. His unexpected response was, 'The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified.'

Again and again throughout his ministry he had insisted 'My hour has not yet come.' He said it to his mother at Cana when she told him the wine had run out. He said it again when his brothers were going up to Jerusalem for the festival of Booths and he told them he wouldn't be going. Later on he appears to have changed his mind and gone anyway again. In Jerusalem for the festival, he cried out about living water and we are told the authorities tried to arrest him, 'but no one laid hands on him because his hour had not come.' And again when he was teaching in the treasury we are told his hour had not come. It isn't only John. Mark's Gospel has a breathless urgency about it - 'immediately the spirit drove him into the desert,'<sup>1</sup> 'as soon as they left the synagogue they entered a house,'<sup>2</sup> 'Let us go on to the next village,'<sup>3</sup> and he forbids the disciples and those he healed to speak of his miracles. Why? Because his hour had not yet come and there was much to be done, 'As long as it is day I must do the work of him who sent me.'<sup>4</sup>

But now, he acknowledged that 'The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified'

For the disciples - particularly Judas - this must have been intoxicating. At last the movement was starting. Whatever was to happen - the end of time, the coming of God in the heavenly Jerusalem, a mathematically perfect city which Ezekiel had foreseen - at last the climactic moment had arrived.

And then he spoke of death.

'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain... whoever loves his life shall lose it, whoever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'

It is a complete disjunction, as abrupt for the disciples as was the lockdown which descended on us, almost overnight, a year ago. How does the talk of death fit with the much more attractive promise he made: 'I am come that you may have life in all its fullness?' How does it relate to the man who turned water into an overflowing abundance

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1.12

<sup>2</sup> Mark, 1.29

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1.28

<sup>4</sup> John 9.4

of wine and who fed the 5000 people with so much bread there were basketfuls left over? John's disciples fasted. Jesus' disciples feasted.

'Who ever hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life and whoever loves his life shall lose it.' It was sayings like this that led 3 centuries later to the asceticism of the Desert Fathers who believed they were following Christ when they chose a life of solitude and silence in the Egyptian desert in order to 'hate' their life. They lived out a life of extreme privation as a symbolic commitment to eternal life. I think in the end the Desert fathers were wrong.

Christ's words here are the same hyperbole we see in:  
'If your eye offends you, gouge it out  
If your hand offends you, cut it off.'

If his disciples had taken those words at face value, the early Christians would have been known as a one eyed, one handed people. They didn't and they weren't - but there is a serious point here. Those early disciples who knew Christ face to face and were prepared to die for their faith in him, understood that his words about 'hating your life' were a way of understanding things that are beyond understanding - the nature of God and death and the reality of eternity. In comparison with eternal life our earthly life is something to be tossed away as Christ gave away his life. But our lives are also paradoxically lovely, created by God and given to each of us for us to delight in. Christ is not belittling life when he commands asks us to 'hate' our life, but emphasising how much better even than this life, is life in God's presence.