

A REFLECTION ON THE GOSPEL FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

John 12: 20-33

We have lived and died with COVID for just over a year. There is every likelihood that figures have been manipulated but the Government admits to a death toll that stands just short of 126,000. Every death has left behind a devastated family, struggling with grief, learning to cope with anger and coming to terms with the fact that so much went unsaid. We are numbed by the figures and we struggle to find an emotive response. Another set of figures was drawn to our attention yesterday that went unreported by most of the media in the UK. Worldwide, the number of displaced people stands at 80 million. That's 80 million people who have been forced from their homes and homelands as a result of war, famine, drought, persecution and ethnic cleansing. It's a staggering number, too big to visualise but equivalent to the entire population of Germany. That's 80 million people trying to rebuild their lives, find somewhere to live, find a job, feed their families – all of the things we take for granted. How they yearn for a friendly face, a helping hand, a warm embrace, a drink of cool refreshing water and a crust of bread. The number of individuals applying for asylum in the UK on an annual basis is 35,000. Currently there are between 300,000 and 800,000 British people living in Spain, depending on whether or not they have registered. Each one of these, too, is a real person with real needs. All have a worth and a value. We have to look beyond the figures and see the individuals created in the image and likeness of God, and all worthy of respect and love. COVID victims, the displaced, asylum seekers, expats – all of them equal and all of them precious in the eyes of God. “Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Heavenly Father knowing” (Matthew 10:29).

In today's Gospel passage Andrew and Philip carry a message from *some* Greeks. We don't know how many were involved. Were they part of a pilgrimage or a small group of searchers and seekers of the truth? Clearly, they had heard of Jesus, were intrigued by the stories they were hearing – and they sought out his followers with a view to gaining an audience. Jesus recognises the enormity of the moment, answering simply: *Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*. He is approaching the end and he is all too aware of the final conflict and confrontation that looms on the horizon. The fact that some Greeks want to speak to him is a recognition of both the enormity of the situation and the breadth of his message. Did he speak with the Greeks who sought him? John doesn't tell us, though it's inconceivable that he didn't. He made room in his life for everyone and never avoided difficult conversations. His mission was to be a beacon of hope to all peoples. It's no longer a question of a chosen race – but rather a message that appeals and is directed to all of humankind, the whole human race. Jesus is '*friend to all of humanity*'. At the end of our Gospel passage this weekend, Jesus gives a hint as to how events will unfold. He will die on the cross as someone rejected by his own people, by the establishment of the day, and in the phrase '*some Greeks*' he becomes, in turn, a symbol of hope to the rest of the world. *When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all (men) to myself*.

Over the last few years, we have witnessed a growth in nationalism and populism. We have been fed phrases like: '*America First*' and an emphasis on the notion that charity begins at home – which, for many, means that charity ends at home. We have seen a great deal of flag waving that borders on flag idolatry and flag worship. One of my favourite quotations about flags comes from the Indian author Arundhati Roy: "*Flags are bits of coloured cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people's brains and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead.*" Flag obsession is contrary to the Gospel message and the particular message of this weekend's passage. Jesus speaks to every single individual – and so should we. We are called to be individuals of endless generosity when it comes to reaching out to others – whether they are mourners struggling with a COVID death, those who come to be fed at soup kitchens or food banks or those who spend their life savings for the privilege of climbing into a container lorry or a flimsy dinghy to start a new life away from the bombs, warfare and despair. Jesus never promised us that it would be easy to be a follower. The events of the next two weeks as we prepare to commemorate Good Friday and Easter remind us just how difficult that journey can be – and how glorious the reward....