

Bishop's Reflection – 5th Sunday of Lent

John's Gospel begins with a question. Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "What are you looking for?" The question is answered in a variety of different ways. The wedding guests are looking for more wine, Nicodemus is looking for answers, the woman at the well is looking for something that will sustain her, the man born blind is looking for sight. In addition, each one of us is left to answer the question for ourselves.

In each successive episode the answer comes into clearer focus, culminating with a group of Greek speaking Jews approaching Philip and saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." In this one clear and succinct request, the true focus of all of our searching is laid bare. Our search for knowledge, beauty, happiness, love and healing, or whatever other thing we might be looking for, is ultimately a deeper quest for God, the true solace of our hungering hearts.

In today's Gospel passage Philip and Andrew are approached as intermediaries. As such, they can facilitate or hinder the encounter. The Church plays a similar role today. It is incumbent on us to do our best to lead people to Christ.

The request can also be read in another way. Society is telling us, "We wish to see Jesus." Here the request can be seen as an expectation that is not being met. It is as if people are saying, "We have very clear expectations when it comes to the Church, and those who consider themselves members of that Church, an expectation to find Christ in the Church." How many have left, or remain among us, demoralized, because they have not been able to find Christ among us?

Philip and Andrew take up the matter with Jesus. His answer seems completely disconnected to the original request. What does the falling (and dying) of a grain of wheat unto the ground have to do with the Greeks desire to see him? Let alone his teachings on renunciation, the cross and the disciples' call to follow in his footsteps. And yet, if we listen closely to what Jesus is saying, and look at how he reveals his inmost distress, we realize that Jesus wants us to enter into the deep love that God has for us.

"Do you wish to see me?" He seems to say. "Then contemplate my suffering and death, my great love for you, then see you, too, are like grains of wheat that must be sown, and die to themselves, in order to bring forth life. "Do you want to follow me?" Then you must be willing to conform your life to mine, for "Where I am, there will my servant be also."

In this message, Jesus is asking much more of his followers than the Church dares to do. So often, the Church asks too little of her members, and expects even less. While God calls each one of into the fullest communion with him, we so often limit it to attendance at Mass. And, although the Mass is the high point of communion with God and one another, if it isn't accompanied by a daily pursuit for holiness in every gesture, word and deed, attendance at Mass becomes more of a concession, a token act to satisfy some outside requirement, and risks losing its meaning altogether. Being a Practicing Catholic/Christian goes far beyond our attendance at Holy Mass and can never be disconnected from a personal relationship with Christ. In contrast to the little the Church expects of its members, Christ calls for our entire being, the joyful, generous, free and fruitful gift of ourselves. The call to holiness is not just something we take on in addition to everything else, it is at the very root of who are as Christians. "Do you wish to see Jesus?" Be united to Him at Holy Mass, and come to know him in his self-offering, then make this central mystery of our shared Christian faith the very basis of your call to holiness.