

**OT: Jeremiah 31.31-34**

**NT: Hebrews 5.5-10**

**Gp: John 12.20-33**

As I look back on nearly ten years as Rector of Liverpool, there have been many, many high points. The events we have put on, from services with Cunard to the Proclamation of the Accession, have brought thousands into our building, and we have also filled the place with art and music, including an incredible performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion last evening. But towering above all of this, the highest point – the pinnacle – must surely be my full page appearance in Hello Magazine last year. Profile and visibility are key ingredients to church life. I have always given a high priority to the media profile because church growth starts not with people coming through the doors, but people being aware that there are doors there in the first place. Once they know where the doors are, then they will come in.

Understanding the media is also important. When I arrived in Liverpool my media appearances were more limited. I frequently did a slot on Radio WM, which is BBC local radio in Birmingham, and I had also been quoted in the Daily Star, but other than that it had largely been restricted to local papers. Other than Hello Magazine, my favourite media appearance was in my last parish in Birmingham where, in the week the Pope drove through my parish, the local paper ran a big headline saying "Vicar thanks Pope for bringing religion back on to the streets." There then followed a big article about me, with a big photograph of me, and – just in case you weren't sure who the Pope was – a little picture of him. Benedict XVI probably never forgave me.

The need for visibility is not just the vanity of the individual. Listen to this line from today's Gospel: "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.'" This is not just the simple 'call and response' narrative which we see at other points in John's Gospel: this is about knowledge and understanding. The Greeks in the passage have heard about Jesus and they know enough that they want to see him. I wonder if they know what they want to see, but they want to see him all the same. Knowledge precedes understanding. It is that interface between pure knowledge and learned,

empirical knowledge which is at the heart of the missionary task of the Church. As confessing Christians, we can talk of a God who created us and knows us, who nurtures us and loves us. But we *also* believe that all of this is true for people who cannot give it language; we believe this is true for people of all faiths and of none. Although we associate the phrase “faith seeking understanding” with Anselm in the 11th century, the Enlightenment taught us to identify not faith, but knowledge. As children of the Enlightenment, Pure Knowledge is not always something for which we have language, because language is a human attribute, which must be taught and learned. This is the narrative of today's Gospel reading. The Greeks come and are looking to turn knowledge of Jesus into experience of him.

Experience, then, follows knowledge, but it is through experience that we learn to talk about God, a God whom we have known since before we were born. We read in the psalms: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.” (Psalm 139 1, 15-16)

And our experience of learning and talking about God is not entirely in this building, but it is in this City. Even if we feel that we have the language – which, to be honest, I don't always feel that I have – we need to ask how we should be bringing understanding of Jesus Christ to people who have not learned the language to express their knowledge of him. In other words, I am not looking to ‘convert’ people, but to help them to find the language for what they already know.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews alludes to a distinction between knowledge and understanding in our second reading today. He writes of Jesus, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Rather interestingly, this phrase about learning through suffering might have been familiar to a Greek-speaking audience as it appears in Greek literature in the fifth century BCE in both the historian Herodotus, and in Aeschylus' play ‘Agamemnon’ (Herodotus Hist. 1.207; Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 176-178). The Letter to the Hebrews is not saying that Jesus was learning something new about himself because of the Cross, but rather that the fullness of his humanity enabled this experience. God cannot suffer, of course, but the experience of humanity, exemplified in Jesus, teaches each one of us again and again the cost of suffering. Experience becomes the completion of knowledge.

And so the missionary task is not about providing evidence. This is not what the Greeks in the Gospel passage were looking for. They wanted experience to crown their knowledge. And in the end this is also a reflection of our own spiritual need: knowledge of Jesus is something we can talk about through learned language, but it is experience of Jesus which gives us understanding of that knowledge. How have you experienced Jesus Christ in your life? How do you experience him today?

In our Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah he speaks of the new covenant God made with Israel. We heard this, “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” The Christian belief is that everyone we encounter has knowledge of God, and we must release and crown that knowledge with understanding and experience.

And so what of the press coverage? Visibility is not just about promoting the Church or the individual, but about making that connection between people’s knowledge and their experience. It is in this that we all have much to learn from local newspapers who reported the appearance of the Pope in my parish not from the perspective of the Vatican – which, believe me, is about as far removed from North Birmingham as you can get! – but from the people and places they knew. Our experience of God is local, not international; the people we encounter are near us, not distant; the people who say to us – often in quite different words – ‘We wish to see Jesus’ want to meet Jesus here, now, in Liverpool. And whilst the knowledge we have of Jesus is local, the understanding we have is without end.

**Fr Crispin Pailing**