

John 12:20-33 The Coming Hour
March 21, 2021

People live in time. Things happen in order, first this, then that, and then whatever is next. Try to imagine it some other way. First comes the championship game and then comes the regular season? First comes the marriage and then comes the engagement?

Or, just imagine what it would be like to drive home today if all the houses and streets were in different places than the reverse of how they were on the way? It would be impossible to negotiate one's way through life. In Camelot the magician Merlin lives backwards and that is why he knew the future for all those who were living forward. What if we started out old and grew younger?

And yet life is filled with moments, a different kind of time. Birth itself means your time is now; graduations, marriages, children, grandchildren, even death all involve a sense of the present, preceded by a past and leading to a future. The focus is not on the sequence of events but on the significance of the moment, with a timeless quality.

These moments interpret our lives and because we know the patterns we can have a general idea what next. It is helpful to at least have a general idea.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

That is how Jesus addressed the people in John's gospel immediately after the Palm Sunday scene at the city gate. He knew his time had come, the preaching and the teaching and the healings and the exorcisms and resuscitations, and the conflicts with the Temple leaders and the Scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees were all about to end, and the hour of his “glorification” had arrived.

As in the other gospels there was a collision between what was about to happen and what many of the people were expecting, so Jesus tried to set them straight. He spoke of how a small seed can't grow into something bigger unless it dies, in the sense of being planted in the ground. He spoke of life in this world and how if we become too attached to it, we are sure to lose it and how eternity must be sought and means we must let go of our this-worldly attachments.

And he spoke of how the coming of his hour troubled him even so, just like, try as we might, when many of our times come we are also troubled. He even considered the possibility of asking to be delivered from it, which in the other gospels he does, knowing the answer. We see death as the end, a fateful and tragic destiny. But for Jesus, and because of Jesus also for us, death is the crowning glory.

The cross, a means of public and very humiliating capital punishment where the world lifts up it criminals and outcasts as a warning and example for others, is for Jesus the moment of his greatest honor, the glory of God itself. The Son of Man lifted up for all to see.

Furthermore, what was for Jesus the coming hour is for us, as we work our way through Lent and get closer to it in our annual re-living of the story, an hour long since past. Life is that way. We seemingly wait forever to grow up and choose a vocation and get married and have children, and watch them grow and the hours come and go with amazing alacrity, never slowing down much so that we can think, and the moments that most deeply affect us are mostly past. And of all the moments in time, this one is the most consequential.

The old 1970s Chicago song, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is,” speaks of this same idea that being caught so much up in time, people are unable to see what time it really is.

What time is it? In view of Christ’s glory;

It is always time to ponder the mystery of eternal questions. It is always time to ask after life’s meaning and wait patiently to listen for an answer. It is always time for love and forgiveness, for hope and joy. It is always time to do good, take courage, have compassion, be honest, act with honor and integrity.

Why not a time for selfishness and deceit, anger and violence? Certainly not to impress others or earn God’s favor. It is time for the good, because of that hour when The Son of Man was lifted up. What looked like a disaster turned out to be a great triumph.

It is important to see that the cross is not something that Jesus was glorified in spite of. The cross was in and of itself the source of his glory, his triumph. That is why it is, in some sense, in losing that we ultimately win.

Not that we win by losing on purpose, that would be absurd. On the contrary, there is meaning in our losses and failures *because* they are redeemed. Paul speaks to this quality of the spiritual life when in 2 Corinthians he writes;

“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

This is the paradox of the Christian faith. It has been played out in many ways down through history right up to the present, even now in each of our lives, in our church, in our country, and in the world.

People live in eternity. Things happen in the moment. Try to imagine it any other way. The hour that came for Jesus happens to each of us as we live out the moments of our lives, now even. What for Jesus was a coming hour is also for us a coming hour. We sometimes choose wrongly, but have present opportunities to choose faithfully. And that is when the hour of his glorification becomes our present moment.

Keep an eye open for it. Trust in it, hope for it, cherish it. It is our Redemption, in Christ Jesus, Amen.

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