

Sermon - The hour has come

Based on Jeremiah 31.31-34 and John 12.20-33 (NRSV)

'The hour is coming'

- There is an interesting phrase that John describes Jesus as using at various times in his Gospel account.
- And John uses the same phrase himself when talking about Jesus.
- In chapter 2, at the wedding in Cana, Jesus appears to be at odds with his mother about whether to involve himself with the lack of wine for celebration, and he says to her:
'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' (John 2.4)
- In chapter 4, he speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well, and he says to her:
'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.' (John 4.21)
- In chapter 5, after Jesus had healed a long-term cripple on the Sabbath at the pool named Bethesda, and then further antagonised the religious leaders by referring to himself as the Son of God the Father, he said:
'Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice' (John 5.28)
- In chapter 7, when Jesus openly described himself as the Messiah in the temple, John writes:
they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come. (John 7.30)
- And further on in chapter 8:
He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. (John 8.20)

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- And so we arrive at today's reading, from chapter 12, after Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, and had made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem.
- The two preceding verses explain:
It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!' (John 12.18-19)
- 'The world' is then represented by some Greek Gentiles, who start to ask questions, wanting to know more about this rabbi who had created such a stir.
- When Jesus hears of their interest from Philip and Andrew, he responds:
'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' (John 12.23)
- After repeatedly saying, 'Not yet. Not yet,' Jesus at last says 'Now! Now is the time. Now the moment has arrived.'
- Even though Jesus had been ministering and teaching in only a small part of the Roman Empire, Jesus could have confidence that the wider world was now ready to receive his message.
- Of course, this so-called hour that has arrived then extends to include the Last Supper, and four chapters of his teaching at that meal, and then continues with his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection.
- Even though Jesus is able to recognise that his ministry is reaching its conclusion, he also acknowledges both that it will be difficult to undertake, as well as his determination to see it through, when he says:

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'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.' (John 12.27)

- In John's account, Jesus is not described as praying in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, but instead has Jesus acknowledging, very briefly here, his anxiety over what he is about to face.
- This is more than counterbalanced by his conviction that he is so in touch, so connected, so in sync with the will of his heavenly Father, that he has a comprehensive trust in what God is achieving through him.

The covenant of the heart

- So let us reflect briefly on what *it is* that God is achieving through Jesus at this point - at this hour, as Jesus refers to it.
- There are a number of perspectives on what it is that Jesus achieved, but the particular insight that our Old Testament reading highlights for us today comes from Jeremiah's prophecy:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. 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. (Jeremiah 31.31-42)

- Now, this might not be apparent with today's Gospel reading, so I'm going to pick up on a further passage in John's gospel from the end of chapter 16, when Jesus is interacting with his disciples during the Passover meal.
- Listen carefully as I read the last 9 verses of John 16, because it connects directly with both today's Gospel reading and the Jeremiah reading.
- And this time when Jesus says that *'the hour is coming'*, he is not referring to *his* hour - his moment of sacrificial love - but rather to each disciple's hour, *their* moment when they will likewise engage in acts of sacrificial love.
- Jesus is referring here, in the verses I am about to read, to how he will speak to the disciples *after* his death and resurrection:

Jesus said: 'I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. On that day you will ask in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.' His disciples said, 'Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.' Jesus answered them, 'Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!' (John 16.25-33)

'On that day you will ask in my name.'

- It might seem strange when the very last teaching Jesus gives his disciples is this: *'The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father.'*

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- Think about it! Jesus says *'I will tell you plainly of the Father'*, and then, after chapter 17 when he talks about how the Father will glorify him and prays that the Father will look after them, off he goes to his suffering and death.
- When was he intending to tell his disciples *'plainly of the Father'*?
- It seems to me that he has the Jeremiah prophecy in mind, when God says *'I will write [my law] on their hearts ... [and] they shall all know me.'*
- Because when Jesus says *'I ... will tell you plainly of the Father,'* he continues *'On that day you will ask in my name.'*
- On which day? On the day when their own hour has come - the hour when they too will engage in acts of sacrificial love.

The grain of wheat

- This is true for all disciples of Christ, both then and now.
- Any time we are faced with an opportunity to enact love, even when it costs us - especially when it is costly for us - and we choose the way of Jesus, it is because God's new covenant has been written on our hearts, and we know plainly that this is the way of God.
- Jesus describes this with the small but powerful symbol of a grain of wheat.
- If the wheat grain tries to stay as it is, then nothing changes and nothing grows.
- But if the wheat grain allows itself to undergo a sacrificial transformation, it grows into a new plant, and produces more fruit.
- It is because Jesus, as the obedient Son of God, willingly becomes the archetype of this sacrificial transformation, that in him God is glorified.
- And heaven, in response to Jesus crying out *'Father, glorify your name'*, responds with a sound like thunder or like an angel: *'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'*
- And likewise, when we participate in sacrificial transformation, and enact love to our own cost, then God is also glorified, and his kingdom is made manifest.
- Jesus makes this clear to us, when he says:
'Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'
- Jesus calls each of us, too, to enact his sacrificial love in our daily lives, in our interactions with others.
- And when we do so, just like God honoured Jesus, he then honours us.
- In His name. Amen.