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HISTORICAL SERIES, 10

We Would See Jesus

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(The Rev. Dr. Allan A. Grundahl was the second Bishop of the Saskatchewan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, serving in that ministry from 1993 to 2002. During the next year he served as the Interim Director of Spiritual Care in the LutherCare Communities in Saskatoon, and retired in 2004. Born in Horton, Kansas, U.S.A., he spent almost his entire ordained ministry in Saskatchewan; during the years 1975-1978 he served a parish in Minnesota, U.S.A. This sermon was preached during Lent 1997 in the Hodgeville Lutheran parish as part of a routine pastoral parish visit.)

Text: John 12: 20-33

Even though I come from the United States, originally, I grew up in Canada – grade school and high school. My High School was the Lutheran Collegiate Bible Institute at Outlook, Saskatchewan, where the motto is: “We Would See Jesus,” which is right out of today’s Gospel reading!

“We would see Jesus” was the desire of some foreigners who came from outside Palestine – so that surely fits *me* as a “foreigner” from the United States; a “foreigner” who did “see Jesus” at LCBI in a way that directed the entire rest of my life! So this Bible story is a reminder of what’s so special about Jesus: Jesus Christ is the heart of the Christian faith.

It may not seem, out here in rural Saskatchewan, that there are many “foreigners” who don’t know much about Jesus Christ. But actually throughout North America there is less and less awareness of even the most familiar stories of the Bible. Our society is growing more and more secularized, with so many distractions and other interests that we can’t assume anymore that people know even the basic facts about Jesus.

Furthermore, our world right here in Canada is the home of more and more people from other religions. Do you know a Muslim

person? A Hindu? A Sikh? It's getting to be a pretty common experience in the cities now. So what do you and I tell a person who doesn't know much about the Christian faith?

Well, the centre of our faith is Jesus Christ. "We would see Jesus," folks say in their own way, and we want to respond ... but always with clear respect towards those who don't know or are asking. Neither Jesus nor the disciples in any way "put down" those who didn't know much of anything about Christ. But what is there that's so special about Jesus which we want others to see? Let's keep it clear and as uncomplicated as possible.

First of all, Jesus has always profoundly impressed his followers as the only religious leader (in all of history) to even *claim* to be both divine and human. Thus, Christ is the bridge between humans and God. That special status comes out in the chapters before today's Gospel reading. Then, secondly, and even more importantly, Jesus is the only one who has dealt with the very worst problem possible for human beings: *dying and living again*. Yes, *living again* without any help from another human being! So, when the Greek foreigners came looking and stating their wish, "We would see Jesus," Jesus immediately launches into a description of dying and coming to life again ... like a seed dying in the ground, but coming back again with much more life.

And yet Jesus doesn't make light of the dying part. That's a really deep concern of most human beings – almost a greater concern than anything else, even in our day. We go to the greatest lengths to avoid dying: medicines, and health foods, and exercise, and vitamins, and doctoring, and much more! Even the Bible says that death is an enemy. Certainly the experience of dying was for Jesus also agonizing. So much so that he earnestly prayed to God somehow to avoid it. In fact, Jesus prayed so earnestly that drops of blood came out of the sweat of his forehead – which medical people now say can actually happen under extreme stress. Yet Jesus explained that his horrendous dying would draw many people to believe, turning death into life, and multiplied many times over!

For many of us Christians Jesus' dying and rising is an old, familiar story. But remember: There is no other religious figure in all of history who has even *claimed* to die and rise again. That's the heart of the Christian faith for all who "would see Jesus".

Thirdly, the life and death of Jesus demonstrated a life-style that's absolutely radical in this world! Right up to the point of dying Jesus

preached and demonstrated doing good, even when folks didn't deserve it! That's what made Jesus so radical then...and still does today!

You see, back in ancient times, if anyone harmed you it was only sensible to "pay back double" or more to "teach 'em a lesson" and to make sure they didn't do it again. Sound familiar? Then the Jewish people came along, and they really got to be quite famous for "being fair," not "mean." For they were really quite different in that they advocated "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That is, keep it *even*, not *mean*. That was noticeably radical in Old Testament days. Even though the Israelites didn't always live up to it, they were known in their time not to be devilishly mean like other nations.

Then Jesus comes along with the toughest challenge of all: "Turn the other cheek; walk and extra mile; give your coat away ... and furthermore, do it when it's not expected of you!" Now that's hard for us to do. It's so easy to "pay back" or "teach 'em a lesson" instead of doing the totally unexpected Christian response, *to be kind when it's not expected!*

So, we who "would see Jesus" are called into the most challenging kind of living possible when we are Christians.

Have you and I seen this Jesus who has called us into such a life ever since we were baptized? And can we tell others what is most significant in the Christian faith? (1) Christ is the bridge between heaven and earth, between the divine above and our human world here below. There's no one else like him in any religion. (2) Christ demonstrated dying and living again, and that's never been done before or since. (3) And, finally, Christ modelled such a radical life-style that it still surprises our world today – with kindness when it's not expected or deserved!

That's how special it is to "see Jesus" and follow him! Thanks be to God!