

“When Jesus is lifted up” a sermon based on John 12: 20 – 36 preached at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Lent 5, 22 March, 2015.

Jesus said – “And I when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

John says this is a statement about the kind of death Jesus was to die.

As Jesus is nailed to the cross, and the cross is swung upright with Jesus attached, Jesus is lifted from the earth.

The Jesus lifted up on the cross will draw people to himself.

As soon as John records those words, it seems he wants to qualify them. For among the next few verses are reasons people are not drawn to Jesus or if they are drawn find it hard to respond.

Many do respond. All kinds of people, people from every language and culture and nation, billions of people, but many do not. John seems intent on exploring why.

“After Jesus has said this, he departed and hid from them.”

People didn’t respond because they couldn’t find Jesus because he hid. It’s hard to find Jesus. Jesus is not self-evident. So people may not be drawn to Jesus because they cannot find him, and if they are drawn to him they cannot find him, they give up ... that sounds true to our experience.

Other people did not respond because they could not see Jesus despite looking. They looked and saw, and could not see in the way John understands seeing. They could not see his significance. And they could not respond because their hearts were not soft enough ... that sounds true to our experience.

And says John, some did believe in him, but they didn’t want to be thrown out of the synagogue.

Some are drawn to Jesus but they don’t want to confess it because they don’t want to suffer the consequences. They don’t want to risk their company. They don’t want to risk their reputation or loss of friendships or loss of jobs ... that seems true to our experience.

But there are more than that, aren’t there?

Just a few verses later, “Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.”

Judas Iscariot. In the end, because Jesus was lifted high, because he didn’t lead the revolution Judas hoped for, in the way Judas hoped for, he wasn’t drawn to a crucified Jesus.

And Peter: “Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.” Peter did. When he was afraid, when Jesus was lifted high, he wasn’t drawn to Jesus. He ran away. We know that later he was drawn back to Jesus, and confessed him three times.

And Pilate who gave Jesus to the crowd. The fair weather ruler. There was a lot at stake for him. His reputation. His rule. He wasn’t drawn to Jesus.

And the soldiers. They put a crown of thorns on his head, and they cursed him and struck him in the face. The servants of the Empire. There was a lot at stake for them if they were seen to be disobeying the Empire. They weren't drawn to Jesus.

And the chief priests and the police called out – the religious ones – they too cried out “Crucify him.” They weren't drawn to Jesus.

And the crowd – the people carried along by the spirit of the day, the consensus, the way everyone thought, they cried out “Crucify him.” They weren't drawn to Jesus.

Now many of these people may have been drawn to Jesus, but there were reasons they could not respond. Too much was at stake for them.

So what is this – “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

Let's turn to the gospel of Mark to understand a little more.

In Mark's gospel, people mock Jesus for not coming down from the cross.

“He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.”

“Come down from the cross now”, then we will see, then we will believe.

Perform one final great miracle, a Houdini, then we will believe.

As I was exploring the text, I met up with some guys, mainly non-church going, in a flat this last week to see what they might say. So as not to surprise them too much, I asked what turned them off religion.

Here is a paraphrase of what they said ...

“Religion is unfamiliar. In the past life was more tough and to get through people needed support. Life isn't as tough today. People today don't need to be religious so much. So we just don't know about religion. It doesn't fit the framework we have learned. A really small group of religious people, fundamentalists, scare others away, with the history of violence. There's also the fear of indoctrination, of being brain-washed, trapped, converted, manipulated. There's also the idea that to be in Church you need to behave in a certain way, to fit a certain kind of mold. It's too constraining, restricting, and when you go among religious people you feel like an outsider. You might say or do the wrong thing. Then there's the question of which religion – most people are religious by accident of their place of birth, so I would like to know about different religions to choose. And I would like to understand how religions developed – Christianity from Judaism, and Islam from what? And what about the fanciful stuff – the argument between creation and evolution. I have had bad experiences of some churches where the minister told children that to be Christian they needed to believe in creation not evolution. It's interesting how the Salvation Army is seen as attractive although it is a Church. But they feel comfortable, and they are visible.”

All of these are entirely understandable reasons. We might agree with a lot of them, indeed all of them. There is every reason not to come to Church, to be “religious”.

And I asked: "What do you make of the Jesus figure?" "I don't know much about him."

It occurred to me that their list was about how we add to Jesus. We do not trust that Jesus himself, lifted high, will draw people to himself, so we compensate for it.

We put a sword in his hands and compel people to respond.

We put rules around Jesus and expect people to behave a certain way.

We criticise other faiths in order to make Jesus look better.

And more.

But Jesus says - I am the one who draws people to himself, when I am lifted high, on a cross. A crucified Christ draws people.

That is sufficient.

Last Saturday at the fair I was persuaded to buy this book about Sister Annie James, a deaconess from Herbert in North Otago who worked in China from 1912 until 1951.

She is a hero of our place. When she could have left China because of the Japanese invasion, she chose to stay with her people. When she could have left China because of civil war, when she could have left China because of the cruel excesses of the early stages of Communist rule, she chose to stay, and came close to dying having been imprisoned at the end.

All through she was determined to care for people regardless of faith. The name of her hospital was "The Hospital of Universal Love".

Annie James did not seek to impose faith by force. She did not try to get Chinese people to adopt western ways. She believed that a Jesus lifted high on a cross was sufficient to draw people to himself. Her role was to point to him.