If I be lifted up

John 13:20-36

St Francis 18/10/15

A couple of years ago, I was asked to go into John Ruskin College and do a presentation entitled ‘Do we need God in the 21st Century?”. Students could sign up to a particular session and we did it four times over with up to 80 students at a time. I felt a bit like one of those Christian martyrs being thrown to the lions in the Coliseum at Rome. The debate was lively, loud, and sometimes a little out of control. But reflecting what I presented and what I did, I am sure that today I would do it very differently. Then I presented things like how science doesn’t have all the answers, how religion is a force for good in the world, for how religious people do lots of charity work and caring for others, because I knew I had Hindus and Muslims in the audience. I talked about prayer, and answers to prayer, I even talked about sin and how God meets our need for forgiveness. But looking back on it I missed out one thing. Can you guess what it is? Jesus!!

I didn’t actually mention Jesus and I didn’t realise. How crazy is that? To be fair on myself, the title only talked about God, but nevertheless I didn’t mention Jesus. It showed me that some kind of Jesus less religion is very insidious. It is inoffensive, acceptable but actually quite dangerous to us.

A few years ago, some researchers interviewed 3000 teenagers in America about their beliefs. The results were very interesting. They found the teenagers had kind of invented their own religion which they called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The common factors were

1. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
2. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
3. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
4. Good people go to [heaven](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven) when they die.

It’s moralistic because it’s about being “nice”

It’s therapeutic because it’s about feeling good about yourself

It’s called Deism because God is pretty remote from you and doesn’t demand much.

Faithful prayer is absent, disciple, sacrifice and grace are missing.

And guess what? It doesn’t mention Jesus.

How easily we can fall into this! It’s so easy for the church to fall into this without even realising!

Maybe it’s the same in our personal conversations. Do you ever get people saying to you “I don’t believe in religion because it causes all the wars and conflicts in the world”? And do you find yourself defending “religion” and defending Christianity, or defending the church or even defending God? It comes down to who can batter their opponent with more convincing arguments.

You know what? I have decided that I’m not going to defend religion or even Christianity anymore – what I’m going to do is to talk about Jesus.

In America, someone recently surveyed 100 people on the street and asked them what they thought about Christianity. This was America where there have been huge battles between Christians and others on many topics such as abortion, the gay issue, politics, wars, gun laws etc, etc. You may or may not be surprised that their views about Christianity were pretty negative. They then asked the same 100 people what they thought about Jesus. The answers were completely opposite – Jesus was held in almost universal regard by the common people. It seems to have been the same in Jesus day.

Our reading begins with some Greeks asking to see Jesus. Jesus was making a name for himself and his appeal stretched far beyond the boundaries of his own family and community. Greeks had heard of him. Greeks were pagans, heathen gentiles. Greeks were not welcome in the temple or synagogue. But they wanted to know about Jesus.

So eventually they were taken to Jesus and Jesus said some challenging things.

Number one. If you want to follow me, it’s free but it will cost you everything. Verse 25:

“Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”.

God’s grace is free to anyone and everyone. He makes the foulest sinner clean. There’s no requirement to be a “nice” person to embark on a life with Jesus. But you will lose your life – your ambitions, your dreams of comfort and wealth, your possessions – even your health.

Number two. Jesus is not remote. He wants to be involved; he wants to be close with you and you with him.

**26**Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

Jesus wants to live in your pocket. He wants to share daily life with you. He wants you to follow him and his actions. He wants you to be Good News to others. And in his mercy he will honour you as you honour Him.

One of my favourite stories is from Carl Medearis who was missionary in Beirut for 12 years. In his experience, in a Muslim context, it’s surprising what you can get away with. On one occasion he was invited to dinner by a doctor friend at an expensive restaurant. Also in the party was a Lebanon MP and his entourage. At one point in the meal the host suggested that they should stand up and say something for 2 minutes. Carl was third in line. He toasted the doctor, thanked him for the meal and also thanked the community for how much they had taught him about Jesus, and how Jesus had become the most important thing to him in the whole world. Remember Carl was the only Christian. What happened next was incredible. For some reason every other guest felt obliged to honour Jesus in their little speech! Carl laughed about that all the way home.

As we honour Him … he honours us.

Finally, and to perhaps sum up the whole message let’s read verse 32 again

**32**And I, when I am lifted up[[g](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+12&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26613g)] from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India, wrote this in his book, *The Christ of the Indian Road:*

“The sheer storm and stress of things had driven me to a place that I could hold. Then I saw that there is where I should have been all the time. I saw that the Gospel lies in the person of Jesus, that he himself is the Good News, that my one task was to live and present him”

The scholars will tell you that “lifted up” has a double meaning:

1. It indicates Jesus raised up in glory – the Jesus we worship, the Jesus whose way of love we follow
2. It indicates Jesus shamed on the cross – bearing the price for our sins so we can be forgiven

Our task is as Christians is to speak of someone we know and follow, Jesus. We are not called to speak *about* him as if he is an abstract concept, but speak of him from our own authentic experience of following the Jesus way, the way of love, the way of forgiveness and the way of hope.

And then we will find that people will be drawn not to us, but to Him.

Back to my experience in John Ruskin College: fortunately for me, one of the students, called Joshua (a variation on the name Jesus) did what I didn’t do. He testified powerfully of what Jesus meant to him. Jesus was indeed present and active and will be in our lives when we speak of and honour Him.

Amen.