

JOHN 12:20-33  
STAYING THE COURSE

Time – the clock is ticking and you are waiting for... what? Kenny yesterday had the longest ten or fifteen minutes as he waited for Claire to come to the church for their wedding; parents are waiting for birth of a child, and I suspect your perspective on that waiting is different depending on whether you are mum or dad; maybe you are waiting for a bus or train in the snow and you have no idea when or whether the bus or train is going to turn up; others waited for three days in the airport for planes to start flying so that they could go away on holiday. There is a more ominous sense of waiting: waiting for a hospital appointment to have tests, or to get test results, or then to get the treatment that the test results say you need; maybe there is a sinking feeling in your heart as the day draws nearer and you hope for best but fear the worst. Finally, the day dawns...Staying the course sometimes means waiting!

Time and waiting is the first of two intriguing ideas at the heart of our passage from John 12 today. Through John's gospel there has been a thread running: "*my time has not yet come; the time is not right*" (said Jesus) when people have tried to persuade Him. But now, today, triggered by visit from some "Greeks" (though we don't know who they are!) Jesus says "*the hour...*" (John 12:23) This seems to be in the aftermath of Palm Sunday, either later in the same day or on the next day that these Greeks come and say "*Sir, we...*" (John 12:21) As I said earlier, we have no idea if that meeting took place or not, but it seems to be the trigger for Jesus. Now, He is sure, this is the time; if He didn't know it before, then now He is sure; this is the time; the hour has come; the waiting is over.

For Jesus it is not altogether happy waiting: "*Now my...*" (John 12:27f) The sense that the time has come troubles Jesus; He is agitated by it; there is some part of Him that might dearly love to avoid the time that is coming. He knows what is coming and He knows that it will be a hard time, with suffering and hardship, and there is part of Him that recognises this and maybe wants to bypass the cross. Never take the cross for granted; never think it was easy or straightforward for Jesus to go to the cross; it was not easy, it was not straightforward, there is nothing superficial about this story; it takes us to the depths of human nature and Jesus visits some dark places on the way to the cross. The time was not yet; now the time has come; for what? Will He stay the course or will He walk away?

That takes us to the second intriguing idea in these verses. Jesus says "*I when...*" (John 12:32) What does "lifting up" mean? Well, physically it means that Jesus will be lifted up onto the cross, does it not? It is all about Him being crucified; the very nature of crucifixion is that someone is lifted up onto a cross and so the death is a very public thing, with the criminal's crimes listed for all to see. Jesus will be physically lifted up onto the cross to die. Yes, that's true! But "lifting up" can also mean something else: being lifted up can also mean to be exalted, honoured, shown to be great! This is the paradox at the heart of this story! Jesus talks about the hour having come for Him to be "glorified" – whatever the cross is, it is not glorious, but Jesus talks about the hour coming for the cross and the hour coming for Him to be glorified, shown to be great, lifted up in the eyes of the world. It seems as if He is talking about being "lifted up" in both senses and in both senses at the same time. He will be lifted up onto the cross and at same time He will be exalted, glorified as God's appointed Saviour for the world. He will draw people to Him and they will believe in a crucified Messiah; God will be praised! He stayed the course; He achieved!

Billboards are everywhere. They advertise all kinds of things, from Sky TV to orange juice; these are huge great advertising images that we can't miss and they are there to persuade us to buy the products they advertise. Paul says to the Galatian Christians that "*Before your...*" (Galatians 3:1) Jesus is "billboarded" before them as crucified; He is lifted up before their very eyes. How does that happen? It happens when the preacher tells us about the cross and Jesus crucified; all over again Jesus is "lifted up" so that we hear about the cross and are

drawn to Jesus all over again so that we might believe in Him. As the preacher tells people, he lifts Jesus up, he billboards Jesus, and we are drawn to Jesus all over again in faith.

You would think that the cross would repel people from Jesus and for some it does; talk of His death and sacrifice turns some away. But there is lots about the story of the cross that others find compelling, that draws us in. There is this great paradox at the heart of the gospel: it is good news but someone dies; it is Good Friday but that is the day when the sky turned black at noon and all creation mourned the death of the Son of God. We are drawn in by the story of the cross; we are drawn to Jesus who dies; His death is not the end and Easter is about resurrection and new life and Jesus brings that new life and hope of glory to us. What is it about the story that draws us in? Here are four answers! We are drawn in by:

1. "He died that we might be forgiven"; the new covenant about which Jeremiah speaks and the promise God makes "*I will...*" (*Jeremiah 31:34*); there is forgiveness and grace for us; so God forgives us because of the cross.
2. God sharing in the darkest moments of our lives, the times when we suffer, the times when it seems as if God has gone away; the cross is about Jesus visiting these dark places too and knowing what it feels like to think that God has gone away. There is someone like us, someone on our side here.
3. It is a love story – it is the story of the way in which God loves the world and lengths to which He will go to demonstrate His love for us; it is the story of Jesus' love for us and for the world, and what He will do to show us the full extent of His love; that He is prepared to give His life, to give Himself for us, dying that we might live, taking our sin on His shoulders; He is loving us and taking our place.
4. The story doesn't end on the cross. Good Friday becomes Easter Sunday; crucifixion becomes coronation; the resurrection puts the seal of approval on the cross; "it is achieved!" Jesus is the Saviour of the world forever.

These are four reasons why we're drawn to the cross and to Jesus; this is a time for faith, to believe that what Jesus did He did for me; a time to trust that what He did works and that we are saved; a time to give praise and glory to God for His Son and for His love. Jesus is being "billboarded" as crucified; He is lifted up; look at Him, see what He has done; love Him, believe Him, trust Him. Jesus stayed the course and invites us to do the same, to stay in faith, to remain in His love; to always walk in His ways.