



The People Seek Jesus to Make Him King by James Tissot

**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
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John 6:1-21

One of my favorite paintings you find when you visit the Brooklyn Museum is a painting by James Tissot, entitled, “The People Seek Jesus to Make Him King”. The painting was done between the years 1886-1890 and it clearly shows a large multitude of people spread over the terrain of a mountain, looking in all directions for someone. There is a particular glee in all their eyes and some are smiling in anticipation. All of them are wearing their best clothes and all of them appear to be men. In the background you see desert plains and the Sea of Tiberias, which is no more than a small river. You see no boats at the edge of the river or anywhere in sight, which probably means that the men lived in that region or have walked here, rather than traveling by boat. Many look to be elderly. I imagine that they have been dreaming about the arrival of the “Prophet like Moses” for generations. As a whole the entire group looks determined. They are here for a reason and a reason only. They want to force Jesus to become their king. We don’t see Jesus in the painting, and the more you look at the men’s faces, the more you hope the crowds never find Jesus. There is a subtext of danger in the idyllic scene. You just know that if these men find Jesus, he will be in considerable danger.

This painting by Tissot captures well the emotions involved in the story John gives us today. You may recall that last week Jesus is in Capernaum. He and his disciples are trying to find a quiet place to rest after the disciples return from their preaching mission. Unfortunately, when they get to their destination, there was a large

crowd and Jesus felt compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He taught them and healed their sick people. After that episode, Jesus takes a boat and went to the "other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias." He is still looking for a place to rest, but "A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." When he arrived at Tiberias, he went to a mountain with his disciples to pray. Once again, Jesus was immediately surrounded by crowds. After teaching them for a while, Jesus decided to feed these people because the Passover was approaching. He asked Philip "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" To which Philip responds, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

I find it very interesting that John tells us the reason why these people are following Jesus was on account of the signs he had performed with sick people. The message was important, but what impressed them the most was his ability to empathize with the human condition and his great skill of relating to people where they were. He has the ability to heal sick people. After much waiting, the people see in this Jesus all the signs of what Messiah would look like when he finally came to earth. He would be a liberator, another Moses who would finally liberate them from the oppression of the Romans. The people have an agenda and this agenda has to do with their own need for political freedom. There is an abundance and a generosity about this Jesus that points directly to God and his promised Messiah. They are here because this Jesus can provide for their needs. Jesus doesn't dispute that he is able to provide for their needs. In fact he proceeds to feed all of them in a miraculous way. He multiplies 5 small and inexpensive rolls and two small dried fish and creates enough food to feed five thousand people. This Jesus can take the most humble of foods and turn them into an abundant meal for all present. There is an abundance to Jesus' generosity and love. His grace is plentiful for all and no one who comes to him will ever go hungry. His grace is overwhelmingly sufficient.

John tells us that "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." I can just imagine their excitement. Finally, the one like Moses was here. In the same way that Moses provided manna for the Israelites in the wilderness, this Jesus has just provided a new type of manna for this wilderness group. They are so excited that they try to make Jesus king by force, to the point that Jesus "withdrew again to the mountain by himself." They wanted Jesus the provider of blessings, Jesus the healer, Jesus the manna-giver, and Jesus the would-be political liberator. Certainly, if this man were to be their king they would never lack for anything. They would be free from the Romans and all their needs would be met. A new time of prosperity and well-being would be a reality for all.

The irony here is that the crowd are so concerned about the satisfaction of physical and political needs that they failed to realize that their greatest need is not physical but spiritual. Their greatest need is one of significance and relevance. Humanity has a deeply seeded need to know that their lives have meaning, that there is a purpose for their existence, that they matter. There is a hunger in the human soul that no amount of physical comfort can ever satisfy. If they had truly understood this Jesus

of Nazareth, they would have received food that never perishes and drink that never runs out. Jesus would have fed them with true spiritual food that would have satisfied this inner longing. But this is not what the crowds want. They want a Jesus provider and political liberator. They want to mold Jesus in their own image and make him into the king they want. Their expectations are immediate and present-driven. They don't want a kingdom beyond their own reality, they want progress and success now. They don't want to become disciples (learners) or apostles (ambassadors) of a teacher, they want to become subjects of a powerful king who can provide for all their needs.

Over the next four weeks we will read from the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. You will see these crowds slowly become disenchanted with this Jesus because he will spend a great deal of time teaching about God's kingdom and leading people into repentance and acceptance of his Gospel. He will fail to act in the way they expect and by the time chapter 6 ends, John will tell us that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (6:66). Jesus was not the prophet they wanted, yet he was the Messiah they needed. Because Jesus refused to be made into a puppet, he wasn't the king they wanted, but he was the Lord they needed. They have expectations about this Jesus and nothing else but the fulfillment of those expectations will satisfy them. Jesus was only worth their time as long as he was providing for their physical needs. He wasn't the Messiah they wanted to follow, but he was the shepherd they needed.

Lest we become too judgmental of the people in First Century Palestine, let me suggest that we too want a pliable Jesus. We too want to make him into our own image. Let's face it, life would be a lot simpler if we had a Jesus who behaved exactly how we expect him to behave. Life would be easier if we had a Jesus who would give us what we want, when we want it and how we want it. We too at times fail to see that our deepest need is not physical but spiritual. What we need, beyond our physical needs, is meaning and relevance. We want to know that our lives mean something. We want to know that there is a purpose to our existence.

Today, I invite all of you to come to this Jesus seeking healing, restoration, and power. But, remember that there is no prosperity without sacrifice, there is no restoration without repentance and forgiveness, there is no progress in our spiritual life without taking up our cross and following Jesus where he would lead. And, when you take up your cross and follow this Jesus, you will soon find that your life has a purpose and that only in Jesus can you find the meaning you are looking for.

Accept this Jesus today because he is the only one who can feed our hungry souls. Amen!