“We would like to see Jesus.” Let me put this Scriptural phrase in context, and then make some practical application to our lives.

We’re reading in chapter 12 of St. John’s gospel. By this time, the Jewish scribes and Pharisees have become very upset by activities related to Jesus. The crowds at Jerusalem have welcomed his entry into the city by placing palm branches to cover the dirt and dust in his path; they were shouting, “Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel.” Jesus has been healing many blind and lame people. He has forgiven the sins of public sinners, which only God can do. The final straw was Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. The scribes and Pharisees feared that if they lost control of the people, that Roman political authorities and soldiers would come in and control the entire land. The scribes and Pharisees complained in a snarky way, “The whole world is running after him.”

Then some non-Jewish Gentiles, who had come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem at this Passover time, asked to see Jesus. It was not uncommon for Gentiles to participate in Jewish services. This had been happening throughout previous centuries. Many Gentiles admired and respected the Jewish faith, and prayed with the Jews. The Jews regarded these Gentiles as “God-fearing.” Ironically, many Jews had not accepted Jesus, but various Gentiles had accepted him and wanted to see him and get closer to him. Some of these Gentiles approached Philip, who listened and then took the request to Andrew. Philip and Andrew could not immediately take these men to Jesus because he had restricted his mission to the Jews. He had kept saying, “My hour has not yet come.” On this occasion, Andrew delivered to Jesus the Gentiles’ request, and Jesus replies, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

The very next words in the gospel of John reveal that Jesus knew he must die: “Amen, Amen, I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it produces much fruit. ... I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Jesus, anticipating his death, concludes, “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

This description present the Scriptural context for this fifth Sunday of Lent. Next week, we will celebrate Palm Sunday, when we will repeat the words and actions of the crowd that greeted Jesus.

Practically speaking, that phrase, “we would like to see Jesus” has a two-fold application for us. First, don’t those words express our individual desires? We too would like to see Jesus! At home and especially at church, we pray, “Jesus, help me. Speak to me. What is your will for me? How should I act in such and such situations? Give me a sign of what I am to do and say. I long to see your face, to hear your voice, to feel your embrace. I need your wisdom and your strength.” And just as Jesus then
revealed himself to the Gentiles, so too he continues to reveal himself to us in prayer, in his Word and sacraments, in this community of believers, the Tradition of the Church and through the Church’s Teaching Office. By creation, because of the intangible make-up which God has given us, we yearn to see the face of Jesus. As St. Augustine declared, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

The second application is this: seeing Jesus is a two-way street for us baptized Christians. Just as by creation, we yearn to see Jesus, so too by occasion of our baptism, we are to lead other people to Jesus. We are missionaries by our Christian vocation. Like Philip and Andrew, we bring people to Jesus. As in Jesus’ time, not all the world accepted Jesus, so too in our time and place. The world is suffering great darkness at this time. We in Western Civilization have lost a sense of absolutes, and therefore, a loss of truth. We say, “You have your opinion, and I have my opinion,” is OK if you’re talking about which college basketball team might win the Final Four. But when talking about salvation, about principles of doctrine and moral living, and the effectiveness of the Church’s sacraments, many of our youngest Millenial Catholics, those born after 1980, want truth through the application of faith and reason. We should equip ourselves with the explanations of our faith in order to fulfill our baptismal mission to lead other people to Jesus.

As we approach Palm Sunday, may I suggest that each person take the time in private prayer to satisfy your own longing to see and hear Jesus ...., and consider inviting someone who has drifted from seeing and hearing Jesus to come to church with you. In the program called Catholics Returning Home the reasons many people give for having drifted from coming to church include having been hurt by someone in the church, most often by priests, and after they had left the church, they felt that nobody missed them because nobody contacted them.

We all want to see Jesus. May we use these last two weeks of Lent to do our part through private prayer and personal invitation to help everyone to see and hear Jesus.