

Sermon on John 12: 20-33

21.3.21

Today we mark the 5th week of Lent; the start of Passiontide, with a reading from John's gospel. In some ways the gospel reading set for today is in the wrong place. So, perhaps I should issue a spoiler alert. It is next week, Palm Sunday, when we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, seated on a young donkey and greeted by a great crowd waving palm branches and shouting 'Hosanna'. The reading today describes what happened before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Amongst the crowds were some Greeks. Many Greek-speaking Jews would return to Jerusalem for festivals and are usually referred to as Hellenists, so these 'Greeks' may well have been visitors; travellers or what we would probably call them, 'tourists'.

They approached Philip, possibly because his name is Greek, it means "horse-lover". Many Greek-speaking Jews would be in Jerusalem for the Passover, they were known to be great travellers, always seeking something new. Philip was from Bethsaida, where there were a number of Greeks living and where Andrew and Peter lived. Presumably they approached him because he spoke their language.

We don't read a lot about Philip, but he was a disciple from the very beginning. The calling of Simon Peter and Andrew, his brother, is described in detail, in chapter 1 of John's gospel. The day afterwards, Jesus met Philip and said to him, said to him specifically, "Follow me." Philip was from the same town as Andrew and Peter and he found Nathanael and told him about Jesus. These are the first disciples.

So, back to Jerusalem. The Greeks approached Philip "We want to see Jesus," they said. Philip told Andrew and they both told Jesus.

Jesus recognises that the hour has come and explains what is to happen to him by using a parable: the parable of the grain of wheat.

You need to concentrate hard and use your imagination.

We start with one small grain of wheat. It can sit in the palm of your hand and it does absolutely nothing. It just sits there and will continue to sit there forever, if you let it. Boring.

Take that grain of wheat and put into a transparent plastic cup filled with soil. It just continues to sit there.

Push it into the soil and add a small amount of water to dampen the soil. It still sits there: is it dead?

Forget about it. Nothing is happening. It is boring!

Something starts to happen We can't really see it but the grain absorbs water. We can't see it but an embryo starts to grow using the food stored in the grain.

A tiny root starts to appear, anchoring the grain to the soil and which grows bigger. It is absorbing water and the nutrients from the soil.

A shoot appears, a tiny green shoot out of the soil..

A leaf appears, followed by many more. You can plant it into the ground.

It grows and grows: pollen is released and it is fertilised.

A new grain grows; a wheat ear is formed, with many individual grains of wheat but it is very soft and delicate.

The grains becomes harder and drier and, eventually, they are ready for the harvest.

That single grain of wheat turns into many grains of wheat.

It is a miracle of nature. An example of a miracle that is truly wonderful, because this is happening every year

But Jesus is using this miracle of nature to explain what was going happen; what must happen to him in Jerusalem.

A grain of wheat must fall into the ground, be buried and the outer husk break open for the new shoot to grow. If it is just left as it is, it stays alone and will, eventually, just die.

We have come to the moment when Jesus is making clear to the disciples what is going to happen to him. He says, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

The crowd just thought perhaps they had heard thunder. Some thought an angel has spoken to him.

Jesus' answer was to say to them, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Jesus knows the struggles we have all faced during the past year. He knows that we are weak and often frightened but that the darkness of death, his death by crucifixion, enables all of us to become children of the light through his glorious resurrection.

That is why we can pray together:

God of Love,

*As we think about all that has changed this year,
help us to trust that you are always with us.*

*As we remember those who have died,
help us to trust they are at peace with you.*

*As we reach out to others with kindness and care,
may hope shine out in every heart and home.*

Amen