

Sermon for 21 March 2021 – Passion Sunday – Hebrews 5: 5 – 10; John 12: 20 – 33

We have a national Day of Reflection coming up this Tuesday – the anniversary of the first lockdown in 2020. I've also been reflecting on this. This has been a time of unimaginable loss, suffering and death across the world. Hardly any communities have not been affected. We have had our own tragedies near at hand. And those who have lived on through it have suffered too from having to be isolated from family and friends. I spoke to someone the other day who had been unable to see her mother at all for the last year of her mother's life. It's not over yet.

But out of all of this, as well as all that's been lost, has come extraordinary selflessness, acts of generosity, new life and creativity that we could not have imagined either. Some things will have changed for ever, and as I heard someone saying on the radio the other day we probably will talk about 'BC' and 'AC' – 'before Covid' and 'after Covid' for years to come. It will perhaps be in some respects a 'death and resurrection' experience for us all.

But nothing can ever compare with the depth, the mystery and the scope of what Jesus achieved by dying on the Cross.

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12: 24)

When Jesus said those words he had become a celebrity. The Passover Festival was about to take place. Jerusalem was full to bursting, and the crowd had just proclaimed him as King of Israel as he rode into the city on a donkey. As he did this, he and they would have known he was acting out a prophecy from the Scriptures about the coming Messiah (Zechariah 9:9). The Pharisees standing by decide he's unstoppable, shake their heads and say "Look, the world has gone after him". His fame has even begun spread beyond his own people; some Greeks who have come to join in the Jewish festival ask to see Him. It's into this moment of popularity and adulation that Jesus speaks the words about the grain of wheat. The hour has indeed come for him to be glorified, but it's not the kind of glory that the crowd have in mind.

The other day I was out in the vicarage garden planting some wildflower seeds. They were a mixed packet – and they were a present from Germany, so I've no idea what the flowers are going to be. I was struck by how various the seeds were; different colours, different shapes and sizes. And I mused on the idea that they as they germinated they would be transformed into something unimaginably different from their current form. And that transformation involves losing absolutely everything about their current shape, size and colour.

I also chose to have the verse about the grain of wheat embroidered on my ordination stole, and it seemed appropriate to wear that stole today. At first sight I think it looks a bit like Harvest Festival; but if you look closely – on one side is the Cross with the grain of wheat falling into the ground. On the other side the whole field of wheat coming up from that one grain. I chose it because I was very aware at that time that sometimes in order to do the one thing that's really important you have to leave a lot of other things behind.

And that's part of the meaning of the verse. Here is Jesus at the height of his earthly fame. His influence looks set to spread even beyond His own people. But he knows that he must leave behind the adulation and the popularity to do the one thing that is central to his mission. "The hour has come," he says, "for the Son of Man to be glorified". This is a very costly kind of glory, but he knows that this is the only way. He knows the scriptures that speak not only of a triumphant Messiah, but also of the suffering servant in Isaiah, the one who is despised and rejected, who is crushed for our iniquities, who bears the sin of all, like a lamb led to the slaughter (Isaiah 52: 13ff).

The cost for Jesus was real and deep. As we heard in our first reading, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death,.....Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." (Hebrews 5: 7 – 8) And in our Gospel reading he says "Now my soul is troubled" – a reference to the suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. What was so terrible for Jesus was not only the physical suffering, but the sense that he had been rejected by His people, betrayed, and abandoned by his friends and even forsaken by His Heavenly Father. Jesus on the Cross is God, emptied of everything but love. ¹

But what looks from the outside like death and destruction is in fact the way to life and growth. Life and growth of a kind that could not have been imagined from anything that came before. So Jesus says "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12: 32). These words speak of the Cross, the Resurrection and the Ascension which taken together lead to countless people placing their trust in Jesus, receiving forgiveness of their sins and a new kind of life, eternal life, in relationship with God for ever.

And we are called to follow Jesus in the costly way of dying and rising; the only way that we are going to bear fruit. The difference is that through the Holy Spirit we have Jesus there with us, closer than a heartbeat, every step of the way.

Amen

Revd Diana Young 18 March 2021

¹ Sam Wells, *A Cross in the Heart of God*, p79