

**‘Unless a wheat grain falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain’**

**Sermon preached at All Saints’ church by Rev Christopher Harrison,**

**18<sup>th</sup> March 2018 (Lent 5)**

Jesus said, ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest’ (John 12)

What did Jesus mean by this? He is surely not giving agricultural advice. He has just entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, being acclaimed by the crowds as the descendant of King David who must surely be the Messiah. His support could hardly have been greater; stories of his miracles and his authoritative teaching had gone before him and had given him a huge following. So was this to be the king who would rule Israel and restore it to its former glory among the nations?

Those who expected this were to be disappointed, and Jesus knew it. Not for him were the temptations of earthly power which had been presented to him so convincingly back in the wilderness when he had been tempted by Satan. He had to find a way of getting across the message that his task was very different. The climax of his life on earth was not to be a coronation, but a death. Naturally, very few would understand him. Most of his supporters were likely to feel very let down, which is perhaps why he resorted to an image with which everyone would have been familiar: that of the grain of wheat. Now of course a grain of wheat doesn’t actually die; it dries up and its life force becomes dormant. But the details don’t make any difference to the argument. Just as a grain of wheat has to shrivel up and appear to be lifeless before it can germinate and produce new growth, so Jesus had to die before new life was possible.

The image of the grain of wheat may not have been original; we know that in the Greek Eleusinian mysteries – religious rites undertaken by certain initiates – the grain of wheat symbolised immortality. So perhaps Jesus was using an image which he had every hope would make his point clearly, both to Jews and to those of the Greek world.

He did not specify at that point just how the new life of the resurrection would come, and the impact it would have on the world. It was to be the privilege of his followers to experience later how his rising again would somehow transform both them and many others, as people b

became aware that the risen life of Jesus gave them both new hope for the future as well as liberation from those aspects of the past which continued to hold them in bondage. The rich harvest of the grain of wheat which died and then bore fruit in abundance was going to change a band of dejected and disorganised disciples into a Church which would spread all over the world.

But Jesus, when he referred to the grain of wheat, was not talking only about himself. He said, 'Anyone who loves his life loses it, anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life'. Those words remind us of his instruction to 'Take up your cross and follow me', which he gave to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, to the north of Lake Galilee. Are we all, then, summoned by Christ to take our place on the cross beside him?

Whenever we hear these words, we must remind ourselves that they lie at the centre of Christ's teaching and at the heart of our faith. So much of life today seems to revolve around how to get what we want, do what we want, be comfortable, happy, and satisfied with everything – in other words, to feel good. There are so many influences today which reinforce this prevailing belief that meeting our needs and wants is the most important purpose of life.

It hasn't always been so. Among the ancient Romans, the Stoics believed that true happiness could be achieved only by self-denial. In the early days of the Church, the Desert Fathers and others who devoted their lives to asceticism (self denial) were a very important strand in the Church's life. This in time led to the rapid rise and then the flourishing of the monastic tradition throughout Europe, and beyond, in the so-called Dark Ages and then the Middle Ages, before decline and materialism set in within some monastic orders. We mustn't forget, also, the many saints and martyrs of the Church who were called to make the ultimate sacrifice, actually losing their lives for Christ rather than holding on to them.

But we are still left with the question: what does it mean for us to lose our life for God, and to hate our life in this world so that we may keep it for the eternal life? Surely it doesn't mean being foolish or reckless with our health and well being, or being so negligent with ourselves that we fail to do ourselves justice in whatever walk of life we find ourselves in? No. Learning to lose our life that we may save it means something different. It can be summed up by the importance of always keeping in mind the need to keep our tendencies

towards self-centredness under control. Self-centredness is not the same as selfishness, but does include it; it refers to all those tendencies which can lead us to become self-important in our own eyes, absorbed in ourselves, and seeing the rest of the world from our own and only our own perspective. Self-centredness makes us defensive when we are proved wrong; it can lead us to want to be in control; it makes us find criticism of ourselves difficult; it can make us tend to use other people for our own ends; and to define ourselves by how important we think we are. These are all examples of loving our life rather than losing it. The opposite – losing our life in order to save it – means, in everyday life, cultivating qualities such as humility; restraint in our lifestyle; an openness to the needs and perspectives of others, and a widening of the focus of our activities away from ourselves and towards the common good, towards the best for all those people on whose lives our own life impinges. And the more we manage to deny ourselves – by keeping self-centredness under control, by not allowing our life to revolve around ourselves – the more God works through us to the advantage of others, and indeed quite often to our own advantage too. For there is a spiritual power for good which is released when someone deliberately turns their attention from themselves to what might be best for other people; and not just to what we think is best for them, but what God knows is best for them.

This is one way in which the Holy Spirit works in us; the Spirit who came upon the first disciples fifty days after the first Easter, and who is present in the lives of all those who believe in his life-bestowing power and who sincerely want God to use them as instruments of his work. This brings us back to what Jesus meant by the image of the grain of wheat which died so that it might produce a rich harvest. Not only was he referring to his death and resurrection, but his words also look ahead to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Church, firing it with vigour and confidence to grow and flourish. So, on this last Sunday before Holy Week, let us focus our thoughts and prayers on how best to put self-centredness aside, as we offer ourselves afresh to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, who is no less than the rich harvest of Jesus' death and resurrection. And indeed the more we live as people who believe and trust in the redemptive gift of that death and resurrection, we enter more fully into the Kingdom, the Reign, the Realm of God; not just ultimately in heaven, but also here on earth, as we become more and more like Christ, and as we truly learn how to lose our life in order to save it. Amen.