

A Grain of Wheat

John 12:20-28

There are many causes have been given for the death of Jesus.

Those with an eye to the dynamics of history have said
Jesus died because he took on the might of the Roman Empire

Those with an eye to the purity of religion have said
Jesus died because he provoked the jealousy of the priests

Those with an eye to psychology said that
Jesus died because of the disappointment of Judas who betrayed him

Those with an eye to theology say that
Jesus died as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and make peace between humanity and
God

All of these verses have a great deal of truth to them
And find support in the gospels
But that is not the apparent reason given here...

The reason that Jesus has to die
Is because some Greeks want to meet Jesus.

What a bizarre thing to suggest?
That because a group of Greek speaking Jewish converts,
Foreign enthusiasts for Judaism who have come to the temple – these are committed
convert
Because they ask Philip to see Jesus
And Philip – seemingly uncertain about this request, not feeling comfortable taking some
converts straight to Jesus – asks Andrew, and now emboldened
He and Andrew go and tell Jesus
“Some Greeks are wanting to speak to you”

And this is the moment that Jesus says, in the classic language of John...
Now has the hour come.

Now the hour has come

Jesus has previously spoken of this hour when he will be killed
When he will be lifted up from the earth
And it has come because some Greeks, some foreigners would like to see him.

What seems to be going on here is that for Jesus
For the good news to reach beyond the confines of Israel

For these Greeks to meet him – he is going to have to die.
And not just these Greeks, but all the Greeks who follow them
He is going to have to die.

And not just these Greeks but the Romans and the Gauls and the Celts and the Scots
and the Irish and the English and the Danes and the Zulus and the Indians and the Chinese
who will

The sense seems to be
If this is to grow
Then I must die.
If this is to live
Then I must die
If this must break past the shell of Judaism
Into the whole world
Then my own shell must be broken
And new life spring from the seed.

The word that he uses for all nations hearing of him is “Glory”
“Now has come the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified”, he says
And there is to be glory,
Then before it must come death.

And then Jesus says this...

*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies
It remains a single grain.
But if it dies and goes into the earth
It sprouts it produces many seeds*

In this, Jesus is talking about himself
He is the seed about to be plunged into darkness
He is the one whose body is going to be broken
He is the one who will be buried in the earth

And he can do this with trust
Because he believes that somehow the life that is within him
Will become something new
In the hands of God.

What enormous risk?
What courage?
Only possible if you trust that God has this
That God can raise them
That God is bigger than death.

In fact he trusts that God will *only* do this through death.

And then Jesus goes further...

He says...

This dying into life law.
It's for me

It's also for you.

He says, unless you die to the things in this world
Unless you hate this life,
Then you cannot love.

The language he uses is strong, provocative, disturbing
Jesus doesn't seem to want to dial this down at all,
He needs us to be hit with this
Because he knows how much we love to cling to this life,
He knows how much we hate dying
So he uses his strongest language...

²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

So I ask us,
Are we hanging on to the single grain life?

Are we desperate to hold on to the smooth outer shell of existence?
Are clinging to the idea that we are smooth and unbroken?

There is a description though for this smooth, under control, single-seed life
Lifeless
Full of potential, but potential unfilled
Lacking in trust
Self-supporting but never life giving.

And Jesus says, the sad sad paradox is that if you live this way,
Clinging on to life
You will actually die.

The very thing you are desperate to avoid will happen.

But if you take the risk, if you take the risk of the broken seed life
Of being planted into the dark earth
If you take that risk,

Then you will indeed live.

You can tell the ones
Who have risked letting go
And the ones who have clung on.

You can spot it
The ones who have let go have a certain wildness to them
A certain fearlessness
They have known the darkness of the earth
They have known the uncertainties of the soil
They have risked all on the vision of God who may resurrect them
And lo, they have seen life.

I wonder if we know the thing we most cling to
It's the thing that terrifies us to let go
It's the one that we do not want God to unloosen our grip of
And yet it is the thing that God says we must let go of
Not because God is cruel
But because in the letting go, we will live.

How does this apply?

Where does this speak to us?

Firstly I think this speaks to us as a Church

At this time we must discern what must die
So that we must grow?

This is really really hard
And we do not know the answers.

It also possibly means that we have to plant new worshipping communities

It is the philosophy that underlies the planting of new Churches
That the seed that grows must be something that has also died
That something must be given up to grow a new Church.

The Church of Scotland's new fund for planting Churches is called precisely after this principle. It is called Seeds for Growth.

Secondly, I think that this is also something that applies to our society.

Think of all that we lost during the Covid pandemic
The chance to travel
For many of us the chance to work

The chance to be with loved ones – particularly at crucial parts of each other's lives
Yet during this time
We found a sense of neighbourliness
A sense of simplicity
A sense of gratitude for being this area

Let us not forget the things that we remembered during the Covid
Can we remember how it felt
What really mattered
Let us not easily let go of the things that we were given to us then.

Thirdly, this applies to ourselves and our life in Jesus...

Thing how we are desperate to hold on to our smooth outer shell
Like all of us keep a hold of our outer selves
Making sure we appear smooth and unbroken

But Jesus is saying that this outer hardness
This pristine image that we need to keep control of
Needs to be broken

One of the truths of the life of faith
Is that when we allow ourselves to be broken
Then a mysterious life we knew nothing about comes to the fore
Though we cannot see
It seems to know what it is doing.

This will cost us our perfection
It will cost us our sense of control
This will cost us certainty, we will not know what is happening

But this enables the life of God to flow out of us
And to reach those way beyond us

If we want to reach the Greeks
If we want to reach the Scots
Then we must be prepared to die
Faith that is shared by in-control, certain, unbroken disciples is not faith, it is religious
success formula
But faith that is true faith, broken seed faith, those who have prepared to let themselves be
broken and lived in by God,
Such a faith will live.

What do we cling on to that is being asked to die
How must we give up
So that the life of God might live in us..

There is a story told by the writer, Cynthia De Bourgeault, called Acornology:

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their life with a purposeful energy; and since they were mid-life baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called "Getting All You Can out of Your Shell" and "Who Would You Be Without Your Nutty Story?" There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped out of the blue by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And to make things worse, crouched beneath the mighty oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing up at the tree, he said, "We ... are ... that!"

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but they continued to engage him in conversation: "So tell us, how do we ... become that tree?" "Well," said he, pointing downward, "it has something to do with going into the ground ... and cracking open the shell."

"Insane!" they responded. "Totally morbid! Why then we wouldn't be acorns anymore."

We may God help us to trust in him
To let Go
Even to die
So that new life may grow
The Son may be Glorified
And the Scots and the English and the Welsh and the Irish
And all those beyond
That all of them may come to know Jesus,

AMEN