

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Passion Sunday – 21st March 2021

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Today is Passion Sunday, marking the beginning of Passiontide. Our attention turns from the wilderness experience of Jesus which has been the focus of our Lenten journey so far, towards the suffering that awaits him when he arrives in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, culminating in his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

Our reading from St John's Gospel occurs just after the events of Palm Sunday, which we will celebrate next week - events which, in John's account, end with the Pharisees saying to one another: 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!' The next thing we are told is that some 'Greeks' have asked to see Jesus. These may have been Hellenic converts to Judaism, visiting the city for the festival, although the word 'Greeks' is also used in Paul's letters as a generic word for Gentiles.

The point being made is that Jesus's reputation has spread far beyond the community in which it began, in keeping with his own realisation that his message was not just for 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' to whom he originally felt called, but also for the whole world. A tipping point has been reached, with the religious authorities concluding that the impact of this wandering preacher is now out of control, and Jesus knowing there is only one way this is going to end.

It is hard to overstate the febrile atmosphere that would have surrounded Jesus and the Twelve as they arrived in Jerusalem. The city would have been packed, filled with worshippers from across the region, the occupying Roman forces jittery about the possibility of an insurrection (of which there were many at that time) igniting the tinderbox which the city became during the festival. Jesus warns his followers what lies ahead: 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.' When we read the word 'glory' in John's Gospel it almost invariably means the Cross – the Cross on which God's true nature will be revealed (one meaning of 'glorify' is 'to reveal'). The place where the price of sacrificial love is laid bare.

The image Jesus uses is an agricultural one, as he has done so often in his teaching in rural Galilee. He speaks of a single grain of wheat falling into the earth. It is only if the grain dies and is planted that it yields 'much fruit'. One ear of wheat might contain forty seeds. If each grain is sown individually, the following year they may produce sixteen hundred seeds, in the year after that sixty-four thousand, and in the year after that over two and a half million. But none of that would be possible without the first one. There is a sense of violence within the image, too - it is only if you crush an ear of wheat that its individual seeds fall to the ground.

Since the fourth century (when Christianity became the official faith of the Roman Empire), being a Christian has no longer automatically been associated with a willingness to lay down one's life. It is now more often associated with being a good citizen. Yet throughout history people have been sacrificing themselves for their faith, and still do. Only last week we saw pictures from Myanmar of Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng kneeling in front of a row of armed police, offering her life in place of the children on whom they were about to fire. A sharp reminder of the price of sacrificial love.

There are other examples of sacrificial love closer to home. It's exactly a year since France and the UK went into lockdown for the first time. The first lockdown was marked in many European countries by weekly or nightly applause for the carers who were on the front line of the evolving pandemic. Was it because of their efforts to save lives, working night and day to cope with rising numbers of severely ill patients? Or was it because, in a way we might have found it hard to articulate, they had reminded us of something fundamental about our priorities in their willingness to risk their own lives to save others? Reminding the world that life is not about seeking to protect ourselves from death (despite the amount of our collective energy we put into it), but that in the end what matters is living a good life? Maybe it was both.

The image of the grain of wheat falling into the earth is part of a wider message we find in the Gospels. It's about dying to self and opening ourselves outwards, to one another and to God. This rhythm of letting go and receiving back is something we need to attend to more closely if we are to understand Christ's message which appears two chapters earlier in John's Gospel: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. We need to allow our hearts to move into the slipstream of giving and receiving, the eternal exchange which we are

taught lies at the heart of the Trinity, an endless mutual giving and receiving in love. 'I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.'

A few weeks ago I received a request to include a piece of music in one of our midweek online services. It was a song originally sung by Bette Midler, which might sound a surprising request for a church service. I replied that I didn't think the song would work as part of the liturgy, but I did promise to preach on it, as I believed that what it expresses comes close to some of Jesus's teaching. That moment has arrived, for the teaching in question is the image of the grain of wheat, the letting go and receiving back. The song is called The Rose, and its middle verse says this:

'It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance;
It's the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance;
It's the one who won't be taken that never learns to give,
And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.'

One of the things with which Passiontide confronts us is our fear of failure. On the face of it, the crucifixion meant absolute failure for the friends and followers of Jesus. Failure is a risk we take when we embark on any endeavour. Yet we may never know what harvest our willingness to allow a seed to die may produce.

I wonder if you know the story of William Leslie. Dr Leslie was a Canadian pharmacist who, at the turn of the twentieth century, became a medical missionary in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1912, he started a new mission station in a remote jungle community where conditions were particularly hard. He stayed there for sixteen years. Towards the end of his time, he fell out with one of the tribal chiefs and was asked to leave. Whilst the dispute itself was resolved, Leslie left the Congo convinced that his ministry had been a failure.

In 2010 an American missionary visited the area, over eighty years after William Leslie left. Although the area will still barely be accessible, to his astonishment he found a network of churches throughout the jungle, each with its own choir, including a stone building like a cathedral that seated 1,000 people, which had become too small for them so they had built more churches. The community ascribed their faith to the teaching of William Leslie all those years earlier. The seed which he thought had died had borne much fruit.

As we move into Passiontide, let us hold on to the image of the grain of wheat that dies. For the harvest that lies beyond it is that of Easter, the ultimate letting go and receiving back revealed in Christ, whose glory nothing and no one can take away - yesterday, today, for ever.

Amen.