

210321 Unless a Grain of Wheat...

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo for the parish of Wotton St John the Evangelist & Holmbury St Mary

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

'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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The twelfth chapter of John's gospel is about death. '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.' What on earth does that mean? It's one of those familiar lines from the Bible that sounds profound but on closer inspection becomes inscrutable. Now we're all used to the portrayal of Jesus as a wandering agrarian sage who told stories about countryside things with which farming people were surrounded. But John's gospel doesn't have those stories. You search in vain in this gospel for sowers, soil, yeast, or tenants. Except here.

Thirty years ago one researcher noted a distinction, in the ancient world, between wild and domesticated wheat. Wind was enough to distribute the wild wheat, but it didn't make for healthy growth. To make vigorous wheat, what you had to do was to take every single head of wheat, break it up, and distribute it evenly. The phrase 'grain of wheat' in today's gospel means a harvestable quantity of already sifted grain. So the saying begins to make sense: if you let the wheat simply grow in the field, it eventually dies, bearing no fruit. If you take the heads of wheat and break them up and plant them, they yield a rich harvest.¹

John chapter 12 is, in one sense, underlining something very obvious. That something is that we can't live our lives perpetually postponing our deaths. It *seems* obvious, but I wonder if we reflect on what we take for granted if it is obvious. The whole edifice of Western medicine is built on assumptions about cure more than care: in other words that we must minimise the number of deaths. During the past year, we've virtually restructured our whole society in the face of the pandemic to minimise the number of deaths. The hospitals mustn't get overwhelmed, or they'll not

¹ Wes Howard-Brook. *Becoming Children of God*, 279-80, quoting Antony Gittins

be able to treat those suffering with the virus, let alone others with chronic or acute life-threatening conditions.

Please don't think I'm knocking the NHS – having lived 10 years in the US, in the world where medicine is privatised, it was one of the things for which I thanked God on returning to Britain. But I wonder, as we've clapped for them on Thursday evenings, if you've thought about why it is we think the critical care medical staff are marvellous. Is it because they're achieving the goal of saving the maximum number of lives – or is it something slightly different: that by going into the place of danger, by spending whole days among people who have the virus, and thus taking immense risks, these medical staff are proclaiming to the whole world that there's something more important than deferring death – and that's living well?

These two statements are so subtly close to one another that it's not surprising they get tangled up in our minds. But in fact, they're profoundly different. If we clap the NHS because it's saved a lot of lives, we could find ourselves co-opted into a large-scale project pretending we can actually get out of life alive. That project is, in the end, a lie. We've all got to die eventually. But if we clap the NHS because it's a huge national statement, based on countless sacrificial individual commitments, that a good life is one spent seeking the well-being of others, even at risk of your own survival, then we're clapping something that's the greatest secular testimony to the claim at the heart of the Christian faith: that Christ died because God so loved the world.

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. Here's the shift in thinking, and living, these words require. It's not a choice between whether you die for a cause or live your life till the pips squeak. We all die. In other words, *we all die for something*. The choice isn't to die or not to die. It's *what you're going to die for*. Think again about that wheat in the field. We can sway in the wind for a summer, and eventually fade from too much sun or too little, too much rain or too little, and autumn comes, and we wither and die. Or we can let our wheat be crushed and give bread or scattered and planted and create more grain. Why wouldn't we choose the second course – unless we're persisting with the fantasy that we can go on waving in the field forever?

Put that way, the gospel isn't simply a story showing us a path to life: it's an education in what things are worth dying for.

The biggest difference between the church of today and the early church isn't the spread of the gospel around the world, or the proliferation of other faiths making Christianity one option among many, or the scientific method by which we become sceptical about miracles or even the astronomy that tells us we're a tiny planet in a colossal universe. The biggest difference is that in the first century, to be a Christian was to risk your life by proclaiming a truth contrary to the prevailing wisdom that said our lord and master is the Roman Emperor. From the moment being a Christian became conventional and unproblematic, Christianity has been searching for the cutting edge that gave the early Christians such dynamism. But we don't have to settle for a comfortable existence or assume Jesus came to secure one. We can stand alongside one another as we each work out our salvation with fear and trembling, recognising the radical implications of our humble convictions.

Ten days ago in the northern Myanmar city of Myitkyina, a protest against the military coup was confronted by a group of heavily armed police officers. Teargas and bullets began to be unfurled. A 45-year-old Catholic nun, Sr Ann Rose Nu Tawng, walked to the front of the protest and knelt before the armed police. She said, 'I beg you not to shoot and torture the children. Shoot and kill me instead.' It wasn't simply a spontaneous gesture. In Myanmar's northernmost state, tens of

thousands of ethnic Kachins have fled their homes to displacement camps where nuns and other Christian groups have ministered to them. Sr Ann Rose's life has been heading this way for a while. Three weeks ago she made a similar kneeling plea for mercy to riot police. When asked, she said, 'I have thought myself dead already since 28 February.' But the second time she was not alone. She was joined by her fellow sisters and the local bishop. She hadn't remained a single grain. She knew what was worth dying for. And what she was living for.²

The witness of Sr Ann Rose – retold in the Guardian of all places – shows us that Jesus' words about the grain of wheat aren't simply those of a sage reflecting on the transitory nature of life. He knew what he was living for. And he knew what he was dying for. He was the grain of wheat that died and produced much fruit. That fruit is us. God knows what Jesus was dying for. He was dying to be with us. Which leaves only one question. What are we dying for?

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/09/shoot-me-instead-myanmar-nuns-plea-to-spare-protesters>