

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent: Passiontide – John 12:20-33

Some of you this week might have heard of the death of Murray Walker, aged 97. At that grand age, there will be a lot of people who remember his voice – mimicked by countless impersonators, comedians and school children alike! He was so passionate about motorsport – his delivery was exciting – unique – and sometimes full of some priceless clangers – as he was getting it so wrong, he was getting it so right – it's okay to get things a bit muddled and actually he was loved for that by many – not out of reach clever, slick or aloof but down to earth, endearing, compelling...

And on that note – I wonder if you have ever imagined what Jesus' voice would have sounded like? Timid – over-bearing – bland? I don't think so – probably very human – exciting – passionate – and compelling. There was something about his voice and there was something about that man...

And it is the 'something' that people of his day – including the Greeks – i.e. all those who weren't Jews – found compelling and intriguing.. It was the spirit of Jesus – the Holy Spirit that was working through him in the name of God the Father – because he knew beyond doubt that this was so –

And because he had that conviction, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to preach the good news – of social justice, fair living, peace – and love.

It was the spirit of the conversation that caught their heart back then – and the spirit of our conversation – all of us who carry the name of Jesus on our hearts – that people sometimes find compelling within ourselves today as we quietly go about proclaiming God's love through Jesus in the power of the Spirit – not necessarily shouting from the rooftops but in the way that we do what we do in our daily lives – it's all about the spirit of the words, the action, the presence. Be bold and confident in that – God has gone in first and waiting for us to connect with the people in our lives who might be longing for their own connection.

So picture the Greeks back then – listening to this amazing man – who then proceeds to speak and enter into a meditation about plants and seeds – servants and masters – life and death...

And it is to that very sensitive and somewhat painful theme – life and death – that we are invited to enter into today in the light of us walking into Passiontide – where historically – and today, people of faith pondered and prayed around the impending passion of Christ – the spilling of his blood just like the sacrificial lamb that symbolised the freedom for the Israelites back when Moses led them to freedom – where the agony and injustice and darkness of all that is the most very broken nature of humanity is played out.

And as well as this theme of the Lord's Passion – we have a theme today as we acknowledge the National Day of Reflection - of reflecting on life, death and dying during this traumatic year of Lockdown – where people were apart from their loved ones in their most need – where people couldn't comfort and be comforted in their dying and grieving – and where families couldn't come together in that most natural yet most painful act of grieving – the humanly physical and emotional fall-out that comes with loving someone so much and having to live without them – that is bad enough in itself, but to not have that last rite of passage as they journey on is beyond the comprehension of some who haven't experienced that – but who nevertheless have compassion and understand full well the sorrow of these days if not the experience.

And together today, we are remembering and acknowledging the sorrow of the moment – for our fellow travellers on this bewildering road – and also for Jesus on this Passiontide path that we have walked with him many times but with each step taking us into a whole new experience of understanding the depths of our need for a saviour – in our longing to be saved – from, I suggest, a restless aimless world that loses sight of love and justice and kindness all too often – and often, from ourselves ...

In both of these expressions of pain and suffering, we enter into the dark and try and find ways of reaching for the light – and sometimes, that seems the most impossible of tasks to achieve..

I remember when I was a little girl being so frightened of dying – my Dad used to come and sit with me to try and comfort me. One of my insecurities – and I know that is what they were now – was the fact that nobody – not my mum or dad or teacher or even a policeman could help me when I died – they would never be able to stop it happening – no one could help me – no one could save me for that – from having to go there – wherever there was – if there was even such another place..

And for a ten year old that was a very dark place – no light and hope there...

This went on for a lot of years – and then the way that this deep fear played out changed and took on a different shape – disguised but still there...

This primal fear remained the foundational fear of all that I was seeking in the years that followed – someone or something that could fill the hole inside that was missing a filling – a completeness in daily life – that sense of aimlessness and lack of wholeness was always there – until one amazing-grace day, it wasn't...

I wonder if you might be recognising this feeling perhaps played out in a different way for you – but nevertheless that sense of confusion as to what we're all actually doing here?

Before we get too deep – let's turn the corner and head home – home to the light that can shine even in the darkest times – the light of the world that we believe comes from wanting to know, spend time with and follow Jesus, the light to lighten the gentiles – the world and to be our glory – our saviour – our friend who will hold us in the dark and protect us and allow us to go into the dark, trusting that somewhere this will be a valley experience that will take us to other side – from dark to light... But my, how dark before dawn indeed...

'Very truly, I tell you – says Jesus – '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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

There lies the answer – whatever our grain of wheat life might be – for better or worse – in faith or fear - Jesus tells us that it needs to fall into the earth and die in order for it to flourish and grow – we need to lose the worldly trappings and fears and follow him – because through his spirit that we hold within us as we do our following – there will be the pathway to the Father – our creator – our homeland – our peace. No matter what the circumstances here – we will get through and get there – in the end...

Jesus was a good storyteller – he could take the most difficult of subjects and make sense of it by turning it around.

And that's the point of the little girl's fear back then – she was asking to be saved from having to go and make a home in a place - that unbeknown to me actually was my home – and she was asking to be able to stay here in this earthly world forever - in a place that actually wasn't her home – it was part of a homeward bound journey towards God's love and light that is ours when we allow the wheat of our lives – to fall and die and rise again to new a life – of true love and true light.

To all of us who are grappling with our faith – and to all of us who are grappling with the sorrow of how things have been this past year – especially for the dying and bereaved – my heart goes out to you – and in the spirit of hope - I would like to leave you with a reflection from one of my favourite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor who offers us this:

'..When the time comes, you can live small or you can live large. You can hang on to the grain or you can gamble it all for love.

When you find you wake from the dream of falling to find it's not a dream, you can actually *choose* to open your hands, along with your battered heart, which is how to discover the front-edge of the good news [of life] – not the life *after* falling – but the life *in* falling – all the life you'd missed if you had clung to the old one you had.

And – if you can trust that, you can also trust this: [do not be afraid] - God will truly know what to do with you next.' (BBT: Always a Guest: P219)

Dear Jesus – you say; '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' May the grains of our lives bear much fruit in their falling and rising in your name...

Amen. Revd Jacqueline Drake-Smith - March 2021