

Lent 5 John 12:20-33

As we arrive at the 5th Sunday in Lent the readings are leading us very quickly to the events of Holy Week and the crucifixion of Jesus. Chronologically we are close as we hear in the gospel that we are just after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey that we will celebrate next week on Palm Sunday and just 5 days prior to the feast of the Passover which we know will see Jesus crucified and even the disciples seem to realise something is not right in the tone of the writing.

Imagine the scene if you can, a busy city, full of visitors, no one knows where they are going, streets are crowded it sounds like a tourist's worst nightmare! Jesus was in the midst of this and not just among the busyness but also the focus of some of it. People were seeking out both Jesus and Lazarus, who had recently been raised from the dead, as this ministry was huge news. At the beginning of the passage we just heard some Greeks wished to see Jesus, even the strangers in Jerusalem, the visitors, had heard of this amazing man and the works he did and despite having nothing in common with the religious background of Jesus, they recognised in him power and authority and were drawn to it. We are not told if they ever managed to meet Jesus but the fact that there were these strangers, people not looking for a messiah or a sign, who saw something of note in Jesus gives us an idea of the sort of attention he was attracting.

When Jesus hears about this request for visitors to meet him he seems to be reminded of his future, how all this will end and truly we reach the beginning of the end of Lent and shift our focus from preparation and self-reflection to a deep connection with the passion and sacrifice of our saviour. Jesus uses beautiful analogy for death and resurrection in the life of nature.

If a seed remains a seed then that is all it is, Jesus tells us. We can vouch for that, we get seeds from our plants and they go dry and hard. Seeds are packaged and sold in tiny paper bags and they are often difficult to distinguish from bits of dirt or tiny flakes of rock. They look lifeless and yet experience tells us they are full of potential. To release that potential we bury them in the ground, seemingly away from everything plants need like light and water, and yet, hidden away like that life bursts forth from them, the outer part of the seed is split open and once the first shoots of green appear above the surface of the ground the plant is many times bigger than the seed ever was. How does it all fit inside? It appears like a miracle every time it happens.

Jesus likens himself to that seed, and we might also be seen as carriers of the same potential through Christ. Just like the seed once it falls from the plant that produced it, from the moment we are born our bodies are ageing. The only inevitability in life is that it is finite, this life as we know it in this vessel our body. We cling to it because it is all we know. To the world, when our bodies fail, that is the end. We are remembered perhaps, our family and friends miss us and talk about us, but we are gone. Yet Jesus tells us that we are like that seed. Not gone, just unseen for a little while until we are changed into something unrecognisable. We long for it to be true that there is something after, we look for evidence of it, but in the end we take it on trust and in faith that we are somehow changed, we can't quite know how, but for the better we are changed.

But still, as the reading goes on, we see that this is not easy, not even for Jesus. We can take heart that in the description of what is to come, Jesus himself, who knows

what the future holds for him, describes the turmoil he feels, the human fear of bodily death, the practice of bargaining for this life. Yet as he muses aloud he comes to the conclusion that this is in fact the right thing to do, this is how God will be glorified, this is in fact the better path for Jesus. He is vindicated by the voice from heaven in order that his followers may hear it and his courage is once again restored.

So we need feel no shame in struggling with issues around life and death, Jesus himself felt the pain of letting go of the familiar, for him it was not that what was to come was unknown, but for us that is true. Jesus tries to reassure us that the vessel of his body was simply that, a vessel to temporarily hold the greater aspect of himself, call it the spirit, the soul, whatever. We are promised the same, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Many, many times in the gospel we hear Jesus speak of eternal life, not tasting death until we have entered the kingdom of heaven, in many ways we have the same promise of hope, when we die it is like a seed falling in the ground, it does so to release the greater being.

To illustrate the point hear this story, it exists in a number of forms and seems to have no definitively known author. Once upon a time, twin boys were conceived in the same womb. Weeks passed, and the twins developed. As their awareness grew, they laughed for joy, *"Isn't it great that we were conceived? Isn't it great to be alive?"* Together the twins explored their world. When they found their mother's cord that gave them life they sang for joy, *"how great is our mother's love that she shares her own life with us."*

As the weeks stretched into months the twins noticed how much each was changing. *"What does this mean?"*, asked the one. *"It means that our stay in this world is drawing to an end"*, said the other one. *"But I don't want to go"*, said the one, *"I want to stay here always"* *"We have no choice"*, said the other, *"but maybe there is life after birth!"* *"But how can it be?"* responded the one. *"We will shed our life cord, and how is life possible without it? Besides, we have seen evidence that others were here before us and none of them have returned to tell us that there is life after birth."*

And so the one fell into deep despair saying, *"If conception ends with birth, what is the purpose of life in the womb? It's meaningless! Maybe there is no mother at all."* *"But there has to be"*, protested the other. *"How else did we get here? How do we remain alive?"* *"Have you ever seen our mother?"*, said the one. *"Maybe she lives in our minds. Maybe we made her up because the idea made us feel good."* And so the last days in the womb were filled with deep questioning and fear and finally the moment of birth arrived. When the twins had passed from their world, they opened their eyes and cried, for what they saw exceeded their fondest dreams. *'Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on people what God has prepared for those who love Him.'*

Surely there is the good news we all long to hear. That the reason we cannot know what is to come for us is because it is beyond anything we could possibly imagine and that those we love but no longer see can be reunited with us again one day and that Jesus made that possible for us by his passion and sacrifice.