



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 17 March 2024

Lent 5

The Curate will preach at St John's :-

Today we think about God's promise of forgiveness in which Jesus trusted and which we too can find our meaning and purpose. We'll think about what it means for God to bring glorious new life out of death.

'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'
(John 12.32)

An illustration to set the scene

One of the sessions, often the final session, of the course which I teach on living as a Christian, has the theme of God's renewal and restoration of all creation.

We start each session with a reflection and on that day, we use a seed head. We look at it, hold it, feel it and reflect on how the seed is the beginning of new things, yet comes from a dying, often seemingly dead, plant.

And we wrap our hands round the seed head and consider the pod that keeps the seed safe and how vulnerable, new life needs to be kept safe. But then we release our hands. We remember that to grow and bear fruit, the seed must leave the safety of its pod, fly on the wind, be carried off by animals or drop to the ground. What risks, we can ask ourselves, are we able to take, to see change and new life for ourselves and for the world?

Today's Gospel teaching

As Jesus foretells his death for the third time in today's reading from St John's Gospel, he gives a powerful - and moving - testimony of his trust in God's purpose for his life. Like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground, his death will be the means by which this purpose is fulfilled. But not only his death. His image of being lifted up recalls for us not only his death on the Cross, but his entire life, and his resurrection, and ascension. The whole cycle is to the glory of God because by it, God's promise of mercy and forgiveness is opened up. The purpose of Jesus' life is to bring all people into relationship with God. It is the time – the hour- for the completion of that mission that has now arrived.

It must be no coincidence that he is speaking here to Greeks, people outside the chosen people, because there is to be no one outside the circle of God's promise. *'I will draw all people to myself'*. And from Jeremiah we heard:

Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31.34.)

And the shocking part of Jesus' confident announcement is that the means of renewal is to come through a humiliating death. It is an idea we have become familiar with. But how extraordinary it would have seemed to Greeks of that time who valued the soul and the mind above what they saw as the perishable body. Jesus turns their philosophy on its head. God's glory will be shown through flesh that is beaten, bruised and killed. I said that Jesus' testimony was moving. For he notes his inner struggle, *'Now my soul is troubled'*. In the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews which we have not read aloud, the writer emphasises Jesus' humanity, his flesh and how he called on God.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (Hebrews 5.7-9)

It was through the weakness of his flesh and his utter dependence on God that Jesus was able to become the means of salvation.

This is not only the opposite of Messianic expectations, but also, as Jesus underlines, a reversal of the ways of the world and especially those of the powerful.

Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. (John 12.31).

Obedience, submission to God, trust in the possibility of new life these are ways to glory. The death-seekers, the oppressors, those who seek to win by destroying life, they are usurped by a different power. Just as (in last week's readings) Moses raised up the snake that had been biting the Israelites to death and God made it into their means of healing, so God takes what seems to be in its outer shell the death of hope, the end of love and makes it the seed of new life.

What are the implications for our own lives?

The analogy of the grain of wheat or of the seed is a powerful representation of the kind of restoration that God brings about in us and in the world. God doesn't throw away what is dying. God doesn't write off yesterday's efforts or last year's hopes. God takes the messy stuff of our lives and reshapes it into more sustainable material, something that can be re-used for God's creative, life-giving purposes.

God's restorative mercy embraces all creation. Please hear this. God's forgiveness is inclusive. Jews and Greeks, righteous and sinners, sure. But also, you, you and me. We have no right to imagine that we are beneath God's merciful forgiveness. We are not our judges. Jesus trusted in God's promise and so must we, so that we are free to respond to the meaning and purpose which God intends for *our* lives. We too have to risk leaving behind the safety of our self-doubt, the voice that says we are not good enough. Otherwise, we will not find the freedom to join in God's creative and restorative work.

The powers of death are all around us. Words that call for the death of women or black people or gay people or trans people. Actions that seek to reward victory through violence, a world where a politician can speak of giving a medal to soldiers for shooting an innocent child or the life of a hostage is seen as dispensable. Only a God who has become flesh, who knows the pain of having their body battered and who has faced the death

of their child. Only a God like that can grab hold of destruction and plant the seed of compassion in human hearts. Here's part of a poem that speaks of the gift we have received of God made flesh.

*We need a God with skin:
a God who is embodied and earthy;
who is washed down lovingly in our birth
and anointed equally lovingly in our death;
a God who hungers
and knows our bodily needs;
a God who can laugh and dance,
who has played
and who knows the importance of rest;
a God who can be cared for,
who can be touched.*

*We need a God who sweats and blisters
from work and from walking,
who smells of the crowd
and of the marketplace;
a God who is leathered with exposure
and tempered with tears;
a God enfleshed,
who will shiver with all our fears,
and will bruise and bleed under lash and thorn.*

*We need a God who knows our dust
yet whose presence
glows with the fullness of life.
We need this God beside us, within us;
to sustain and unite us.
We need this God to assure us
that we are not alone
and that, yes, our fleeting mortal day
is meant, and is meaningful.¹*

¹ 'Give us a God with skin', Br Stephen Eric Smyth

This is the God who became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the God who in and through the physical material of the bread and the wine enters our bodies, strengthens our hearts, transforms, and restores not only us, but the whole of Creation. We may be tired; we may be aching. But through the name of Christ, these gifts and these signs can bring to life in us new ways of feeling, living and acting as people of a restored 'global community of life'.²

'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'
(John 12.32)

and the Rector at St Margaret's :-

This morning we meet to worship our glorified Saviour, who died on the cross to bring new life to the world.

"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." John 12:25

An illustration to set the scene

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge considers himself an "**excellent man of business**".

Indeed, he minds his own business so carefully that he is oblivious to the struggles of those around him.

This is, to some extent, understandable; his childhood was less than comfortable, leading him to fear poverty and focus on self-preservation.

² Acknowledgement: Denis Ewards, Eucharist and Ecology: Keeping Memorial of Creation in *Worship* 82,3, 2008, 194-213.

But he has gradually and unwittingly become completely invested in a self-absorbed, joyless, lonely way of life.

It takes ghostly apparitions to reveal to Scrooge the hollowness of his life and the contrast with those who are generous to others, even – perhaps especially – those living in poverty.

He is prompted to change his ways.

He immediately abandons his previous life and is transformed into an affable, generous man, eager to build bridges with others, transforming their lives in the process. Scrooge's previous life – which he loved to the extent that he was oblivious to its impact on himself and others – is replaced by a life that is joyful and worth living.

And in real life, his story inspired people to acts of generosity.

As G. K. Chesterton noted, "**Whether the Christmas visions would or would not convert Scrooge, they convert us.**"

Today's Gospel teaching

With that rather unseasonal story in mind, we turn to today's Gospel reading.

Some God-fearing Greeks have come to Jerusalem for Passover and are keen to meet Jesus.

Judging from Jesus' response to their unrecorded question, they are interested in becoming his disciples.

Jesus tells them what it means to follow him in the light of what is soon going to happen to him.

He says, **“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”**

This seems a bit cryptic, but the way Jesus describes himself – as **“the Son of Man”** – is an allusion to Daniel 7, where God gives the Son of Man (or one like a human being) **“dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him”**.

So Jesus seems to be welcoming these Gentiles and inviting them to serve and follow him.

But this invitation comes with a warning.

Jesus is about to be **“glorified”** – he is going to be lifted up on the cross and then buried so that his ministry can bear fruit.

A disciple follows their teacher, and Jesus’ disciples may have to follow him to death if that is necessary for a fruitful witness that will help draw all people to God.

As we read in verse 25, **“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”**

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

These days, it is unlikely many of us will be called to follow Jesus to our death.

But we can consider whether the way we live is life-giving and fruitful.

In the first part of Dickens' story, Scrooge has clearly been holding on to life in this world too tightly.

He has essentially lost his life, as it bears no good fruit.

Jesus says that if you "**love life**" – if you, like Scrooge, hold on to it too tightly – you are losing it in the here and now.

He doesn't say you will lose it in future, but that you are losing it already.

But if you hate life (*and here Jesus seems to be exaggerating for effect*), you will hold on to it in Jesus' everlasting kingdom of eternal life.

Eternal life that starts in the here and now but lasts beyond the present, just as Scrooge's story has influenced people's actions in the real life beyond the story world.

Scrooge had to lay down his life of self-interest in order for his life to bear good fruit.

His miserliness may, at first, have sprung from self-control and a fear of poverty, but it went too far and needed to die.

There may be things in our lives, or the life of our Church, that need to die so we can bear good fruit.

Things that need to be buried so the cycle of life can resume, producing good fruit that brings a joyful life to others, as well as ourselves.

"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." John 12:25

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