

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 18 March 2018 Lent 5

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

Jeremiah 31: 33-34a

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Holy One. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know Yahweh,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares Yahweh.

Gospel

John 12:20-32

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Contemporary reading

'Prophets of a Future not our Own'

This prayer was quoted by Pope Francis in 2015. It is an excerpt from a homily written for Cardinal Dearden by then-Fr. Ken Untener on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. Pope Francis quoted Cardinal Dearden in his remarks to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2015. Fr. Untener was named bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, in 1980. He died 2004.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Reflection for the Gathering

There's nothing quite like a death in the family to concentrate the mind and generate big thoughts about the meaning of life and death and existence in general!

One thing I have been much struck by in recent weeks is the sharp delineation I experienced between when the person is alive and when they are dead. Part of this is legal and financial. Responsibilities shift and change, goods are both more available and less available. The person with whom you checked out the big decisions is gone but so is the person whom you thought might not agree with other decisions you may have made or want to make next! That little piece of information that you thought was always going to be there in the mind of a living person is suddenly inaccessible to you in a non-living brain. You wish you had asked more questions and listened more carefully

Too, I think I have discovered why Jesus is written up as such a perfect person in the Gospels. Crafting a eulogy is very different, we found, than having a jokey, after-dinner conversation. Quirks of the person which could be laughed about over the after-dinner mints are not what you would say to a church full of 400 people, 50 of whom are relatives! So, partly because you only have a few minutes to sum up 99 and a half years, you concentrate on the most endearing and the more important qualities of the one you loved.

Stepping back a little, you get a better sense of what incidents speak of the whole person and which are just incidents with little meaning even though they may have seemed important at the time or bring back warm fuzzy memories. You select stories which will let people know about the qualities you feel are most important about the person – to give them an idea of how you saw them, how you thought they were in the world. I think I now have a better understanding why some stories about Jesus made the cut and others didn't.

Sometimes you select a story not knowing even then quite what it signifies. I think today's Gospel reading is like that. I am not sure that the disciples entirely understood this metaphor of the seed falling into the ground. It is labelled as Jesus predicting his death, as if the story made more sense after he had died than before. Even then, I wonder if they were taking still too concrete a view of proceedings.

A grain of wheat is the container for the DNA of the future plant. In it lies all the potential of the organism. It could represent our ambitions for our lives, our dreams of what we could be and become. We might get quite inflated about it all. We can change the world. We might think we are the best church within the PCANZ on certain issues. We might see the situation as one we can fix or influence or alter. And, we want to remain whole and functioning and be the ones to get the job done. We may see ourselves as THE seed to be planted in this place here and now; as THE potential bomb which will explode old ideas and patterns of behaviours. Perhaps we are like the small grain of wheat in Ron O Grady's poem which felt this overwhelming responsibility to change the world: this is what O'Grady wrote about that feeling, that moment of potential...

RICH HARVEST

A single stalk of wheat/grew in an empty field

On one of the stems/a small grain of wheat/was possessed by a dream

It was a powerful dream,/of a new world/ in which wheat/would grow in golden waves/across the whole barren field

Each day the grain would pray/'Lord give me faith/to see this desolate field/covered with your beauty.'

Even when the cold winds/began to blow/the grain of wheat continued/to pray and hope.

Then one morning, a gusty wind/blew across the field/and all the grains of wheat/were scattered into the air.

The little grain was catapulted/from the safety of its home/to land on the bare soil/among the worms and the snails

Surrounded by weeds and/feeling desperately alone/the dream seemed inconceivable/but each day the faithful seed/repeated its prayer

But it knew it was getting weaker/and one bleak morning/it woke up so feebly that it knew /it was going to die.

The grain of wheat/made its last prayer/'Lord, I don't know what went wrong/I tried to be faithful and do what you asked of me/but somehow the new world/seems further away than ever/And yet I do believe/that even if I die/the dream will come true/one day.'

the seed died/and was buried in the field.

There's more to the poem, but let's pause there. The grain has big dreams and sees itself as part of that big dream coming true. It is not in the grain's world view that anything will be accomplished by its death, by giving up, letting go. Whenever someone new or a different group of people add themselves to an existing group, changes are inevitable. Sometimes the newcomers grow up alongside the old timers. At other times, the old-timers have to make way, to give up, let go. Able bodied people may need to take advice from those who need better accessibility arrangements, the cis community who do not encounter their own gender dysphoria, may need to listen to another's trans experience, older St Andrew's members might need to hear what younger people want and need, modernist theologians might need to allow the postmodern voices to be heard, the head may need to listen more carefully to the heart.

I sense this struggle in this story between Jesus and the polite, listening disbelief of his audience. If he hadn't already learned his lesson, Peter may have been tempted again to protest at this bleak picture. The crowd knows something is up in this moment, but not exactly what is up. They mistake the divine rumbling for an approaching thunderstorm, yet the air is electric with yet to be discovered spiritual energy.

And for our educated intelligent heads, it is difficult to read this story with the heart, for the heart-call of this story is humility. It is submission to a higher directive; obedience to a different calling. To 'submit' is a dirty word for many of us. We have fought our way out of victimhood, into survivor status, into independence and we do not want to submit to anything or anybody. Yet the way of the heart might suggest something else as the cold winds blow across the barren fields of our society.

I discovered by writing a PHD thesis that in 1840 – coincidentally the date of our Treaty of Waitangi – the Berlin University was founded. It is now known as the first truly modern (as opposed to medieval) university. Friedrich Schleiermacher, famous preacher and theologian was shocked to discover theology was not on the original plans of the university curriculum. He had to argue for its inclusion. The deal struck was that university theology would be only for the professional education of clergy. So university theology and church theology became increasingly more and more separate from each other. Their vocabularies differed, their underlying premises were unfamiliar to each other and the method of argument and discussion were not the same anymore. The university took the way of the head and the church followed the way of the heart. There has been an uneasy stand-off ever since. It is not that the two were simply seen as different, they became valued differently. One was prized more than the other until today, educated people are often embarrassed to admit they belong to a church because they know or fear they will be ridiculed. The high way especially for Presbyterians is the educated way. But, though putting together a doctoral thesis might be hard work, its intent is the opposite of falling into the ground and dying.

What should be the two halves of the same whole have become two different entities and the heart misses the calm logic of the head in its devotion to the faith while the head misses the warm emotion of the heart in its deliberations about belief.

In my father's physical death there was an opportunity created for transformation which I can't describe because that's my personal business, but I was struck by the fact that this opportunity could not have happened when he was alive. Death was necessary here. It was a precondition for new life getting going. In a way we were into denying death – thinking of how we would celebrate another birthday in August this year, this time the big 1 double 0 in August, but there was another world view which could see take another road. At the Presbytery Gathering in Palmerston North this weekend my rediscovery of death being a necessary precursor of life was endorsed by Peter Jackson minister at Waikanae. He spoke of the spirituality of food, reminding us food requires death to bring forth life giving produce. I am not suggesting we all fall over dead physically! I think that is the mistake the disciples made, or the gospel writers perhaps, when they call this story 'Jesus predicts his death.' This may not be about physical death at all. I wonder whether Jesus was talking generally here. That there are many things in our lives which need to die, need to be given up, need to be let go, so we have both hands free to embrace the new thing. That we need to be brave enough to go down into the depths of ourselves, to explore the heart, get in touch with our emotions and see the growth which is possible in the dark. To reverse our society's fear of what is dark or different, and to explore what is joyful about the dark. Of what Jesus meant when he said UNLESS a grain of wheat fall into the ground..... Our next hymn says: "Joyful is the dark, coolness of the tomb, waiting for the wonder of the morning".

I used to teach about plant growth to thirteens year olds. You ask them what a seed needs to germinate and they list the usual suspects, water, warmth, etc. They often also list sunlight, but the seed does not need sunlight – later the plant will need light, but the process of germination does not need light, it can happen in the dark. Bright, sunlit certainties are not required for the new thing to germinate. What say we allow death to happen, in the mysterious darkness of our uncertainty and unknowing. What say we give permission for the new thing to be born in us. Then, great will be the joy thereof.

The rest of Ron O'Grady's poem? I can tell you now the title of the poem is Rich Harvest. Remember where we stopped? At the stage where the grain of wheat
.. knew it was getting weaker/and one bleak morning/it woke up so feebly that it knew /it was going to die.

The grain of wheat/made its last prayer/'Lord, I don't know what went wrong/I tried to be faithful/and do what you asked of me/but somehow the new world/seems further away than ever/And yet I do believe that even if I die/the dream will come true/one day.'

the seed died/and was buried in the field.

Ron O Grady continues:

Next Spring/ the barren field/exploded into a golden blanket of wheat/with tens of thousands of grains of wheat/waving their thanksgiving/for the grain of wheat/which gave its life / for a dream.¹

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¹ From *The Song of Jesus Meditations* by Ron O'Grady (JBCE Melbourne, 1984)