

Sermon for Tuesday of Holy Week – 7th April 2020

John 12: 20-36

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Over the past two weeks we have all had to fundamentally change the way we live our day-to-day lives as we face the threat of the Covid 19 virus. The pace of life has slowed and our roads and streets have become much quieter. Living as we do in a one-street village even we have noticed a reduction in traffic! The only traffic that has not diminished is the number of agricultural vehicles going back and forth to and from the fields to sow the seed for this year's grain harvest.

Sowing seeds is, of course, an act of faith. Seeds are usually tiny, dry, and pretty unpromising to look at. It is only in that act of faith in preparing the soil, sowing the seed and watering it, keeping off birds and slugs, weeding and tending it, that anything is possible. If the seeds stay in the packet or sack nothing positive can happen and the potential is lost. But if you commit them to the ground, with sunshine and rain, then harvest and abundance follow. However, what is really important is the quality of the ground: if it is dry or boggy and poor quality, then the grower has to add richness to it.

In many parts of the world manure is added or blood, fish and bone meal. These are costly products to buy or produce, because here we get to the depth of what agriculture demands – the best ingredients, the least polluting elements, so that nothing is destroyed but only enhanced.

Tertullian, an important early Christian theologian, observed that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”. He saw its metaphorical growing power.

In today's passage from John's Gospel Jesus is talking about the cost of discipleship in the place where he will lose his life very shortly. His disciples are around him and he has become a person whom many want to meet. It begins with some Greeks wanting to meet Jesus and asking the disciples to help arrange it. The city of Jerusalem has been filling with people coming to celebrate the Passover and some have been intrigued by stories of Jesus' activity. There is an expectation of change, of new possibilities around him,

and yet Jesus here resolutely talks of death. His glorification is approaching but not in the way the disciples or inquirers expect. John gives us these momentous words: “‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

John, writing several decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, knows that Jesus will be lifted up in crucifixion and that in and through this death new possibilities will come to pass. In this death, John believes that what has been a Jewish path to God through worship in the Temple in Jerusalem and observance of the Torah, the Law, will be opened to many others beyond the Jewish people. What opens it up is this death and resurrection which is God’s act. But Jesus is keen for people to know that this is the path not just for him but for those who follow him. He makes it very clear that this will not be a bed of roses and that his followers must become the seed that dies in the ground so that life goes on. In other words, that they must become the soil enriched with their own blood, sweat and tears if there is to be much fruit of this Gospel of God’s acceptance of all people.

So, there is the cost of our discipleship laid out in uncompromising fashion. We must die to ourselves in order to produce the rich abundance of God’s goodness for the world. Our salvation cannot be a selfish and painless affair, because that’s not how people or movements grow. Choosing to be important cannot be the way for Christians to help God’s kingdom to grow. The kingdom is God’s gift to a world which gets stuck in greed and selfishness, carelessness and a fixation on scarcity. The world’s fear – that there is not enough of everything, that only the rich can prosper, that to be counted you have to be important, that God is a harsh task master who is never satisfied – needs to be dissolved in the love of the God who calls for a depth of self-sacrifice but in whose kingdom we come to see that there is abundance for everyone and no need for the poverty and misery that afflict so many lives.

Sadly, in recent weeks we have seen people acting out of selfishness and greed by stockpiling food and other commodities, leaving supermarket shelves empty. But we have seen many, many other people who have responded to the unprecedented situation in which we now find ourselves with acts of courage, generosity and compassion for those less fortunate than themselves. This is the Gospel in action – loving our neighbours as ourselves.