

17 March 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

There is something deeply reassuring about the lifecycle of plants. They grow their leaves during spring, blossom their flowers during summer, lay down their leaves during autumn, and accept the sleep of winter. Then they come forth again into new life as the spring season awakens.¹ Cyclical patterns of this kind give us the comfort of knowing that all will be well again: one season will pass into the next; renewal will come in its due time; and on and on it will go, without end. It is predictable, safe, reassuring.

But the problem is, this is not what human life is like. We know all too well that it is not a cycle: human life is linear. It goes from beginning to an end: a very definite end. So we shrink from the end; we shrink from death; something in us screams “This is not how it should be!”

Next week we celebrate Palm Sunday, recalling Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The Gospel reading for today narrates what happened immediately *after* that triumph. Hearing it today, ahead of time as it were, helpfully gets our hearts and minds on the right track for Palm Sunday and for all of Holy Week to follow.

It was nearly Passover time. The Jews celebrated Passover as a commemoration of their liberation by God from slavery in ancient Egypt and their freedom as a nation under the leadership of Moses. Passover therefore had people flocking to Jerusalem to take part. But in that particular year, many were interested too in one man – Jesus. They had heard about how he raised Lazarus from the dead, about other signs he performed and perhaps something of his teaching, and they came wondering. And hearing that Jesus was about to enter the city, a mob developed, lining the route, waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna”.

¹ I owe this image to Jeong.

And the Pharisees despaired of their situation, saying to one another in verse 19 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!'

The "whole world has gone after him" is a major exaggeration, but ironically it points to an important truth. In the very next verse we read of how some *Greeks* were now seeking him. In terms of the world known to Jesus and his contemporaries, a predominantly Greek-speaking world, this is symbolic of the truth of the lament of the Pharisees – "the whole world has gone after him".

And Jesus sees this as deeply significant: at last the hour has come for him, the "Son of Man", to be glorified.

Why is this the hour? Precisely because in these Greeks seeking Jesus we see the first-fruits of the world, the whole world, coming under the saving sovereignty of Jesus.

Why is this the hour? Because from the beginning God's purpose has been a worldwide purpose.

Jesus concludes his monologue saying "Now is the time for judgement on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The work of Jesus is indeed directed at all people-groups and to all people. This is not to say that everyone will ultimately be saved: those who ultimately choose for a rival, those who ultimately choose for evil, will find themselves left out of the saving benefits of the one they've rejected.

Judgement, a separating out of good from evil, is necessary if God is indeed loving. And we can rejoice in knowing that in Jesus' dying on the cross and rising again, he went on to effect the final destruction of all that is evil.

At the beginning of our passage we have these Greeks coming to Jesus, asking, "We want to see Jesus."

I was really struck by that request, that longing: "We want to see Jesus." "We want to know Jesus."

But what kind of Jesus do they come to see?

In all likelihood they come with the same kind of misapprehension we've already seen in Peter and his fellow disciples. You'll recall that Peter had felt it necessary to rebuke Jesus for talking of his death: dying simply was not the expected career path for the Messiah (which was what Peter had just identified Jesus to be).

These Gentiles may have had no expectation of a Jewish Messiah, but whatever kind of teacher, sage, miracle-worker, or alternative ruler they saw in Jesus, *dying* for the cause was unlikely to have been part of what they expected: for human beings death gives rise to nothing; death is an ending; not continuity, not new beginning.

But here's Jesus again talking of his death, and as he does so he's sowing seeds of hope for those who, in the coming days, will see this talk tragically become reality.

Jesus said, '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.'

Jesus' purpose here is not to give a scientific account of the life-cycle of wheat. His little parable is one that would be grasped from a purely superficial understanding of what occurs with the wheat – a kernel of wheat must be buried in the ground if it is to germinate and grow to bear fruit.

And the point of the parable is that it is necessary that he give himself in death if he is to produce a harvest of life for the world.

Jesus uses the parable to explain how there might be glory where we can find only grief. A grain of wheat has to die and be buried in the earth. You don't get a field of golden wheat without a certain amount of death and burial.

For millennia wheat has been grown. A farmer harrows the soil to break it up and smooth it out. Shallow trenches are dug to create a bed for the seeds. The wheat seeds are dropped into the trench, and covered with the loosened soil. The farmer prays for rain, and waits. The single grain lies there in the bosom of the earth gathering moisture and nutrients to itself, and one day it sends tiny root hairs down into the soil, and then it shoots a stem upward toward the surface.

The result is remarkable not only because a dead seed generates life, but especially because it generates *so much* life. There is multiplication going on: twenty or twenty-five times as much grain is harvested as is planted.

"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."

The Son of Man will die and fall into the earth in an event devastating to his followers, but Jesus says that this is the hour in which the Son of Man will be glorified. And we grope for his meaning. Getting glorified on a cross? Like being enthroned in an electric chair? Like being honoured by a 21 gun salute that turns out to be a firing squad?

Glory in the cross of Jesus Christ sounds almost grotesque.

And yet the gospel wants us to find glory in this disaster because in God's mighty agriculture the death of Jesus will feed whole nations with the bread of life. Jesus' body sown like a single grain into the earth will send its roots down and its stalk up until it bursts from the ground with power to feed the hungry souls of the world. As we heard last week, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Ultimately the cross of Jesus Christ saves because of the resurrection: in Jesus being raised to life again, the tyrannical power of death is overcome. Death is overcome for Jesus already: and the promise is that it is overcome for all of the faithful who will be raised like him at the end of the present age.

This is truly wonderful. But it is also very, very disturbing, because the same Lord who speaks of his death goes on to speak of ours, and his very pointed observation is that he will not be dying alone. Yes, he'll be the first-fruits of this cycle of life out of death, but God isn't going to reap the whole harvest without dropping a lot of other

grains into the earth too. How pointedly Jesus remarks that "whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."

It seems that Jesus wants to share the glory of the cross, and we think this might be a kind of glory on which we'd like to take a pass: we shrink away from it. Maybe let Jesus take care of the dying part, and we'll just show up for the resurrection. Maybe skip the dying part and try to get some of the new life while still hanging on to our old one. Get humility, and feel pretty proud of it. Get gratitude for God's bounty and also restrict the distribution of it. Get peace while still holding our resentments. Get a growing church but without making space for change.

Jesus wants us to go down into a death that will cause new life to spring up twenty-fold and more, but we keep clinging to our old life. Even Jesus was clinging humanly to this life: "Now my soul is troubled. Save me from this hour!" We're like a grain of wheat trying to stick to the seed-head of its old life. But there it will have no future. No glory there. No miracle of multiplication.

To get a new life in union with Jesus Christ, the old life has to be threshed and buried. We don't get life and we don't give life without some dying. The gospel says that not even Jesus got a resurrection without a death.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it cannot bear any fruit."

Healthy Christian people are always dying and rising with Jesus. Arrogance dies and humility rises. Complacency dies, and joy in the gospel rises. A critical spirit dies and a more affirming spirit rises. Grudges and bitterness and revenge die and forgiveness and reconciliation rise. The lifestyle and expectations of this world die, and the life and hope of the world to come rise.

And it is then in and through us that the people of today start to see Jesus ... and the multiplication goes on.

All this is some of the fruit of the harvest, some of the newness of life that is available even while we await the fullness, the joyful abundance, of the life of the age to come.

Amen.

Sources

Much of the latter part of this sermon is adapted from a sermon preached by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., on the occasion of his installation as President and Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, September 27, 2002, and printed in Reformed Worship 66 (March, 2003). <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2003/unless-grain-wheat-falls-sermon>

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