

Death has been defeated...

... and that changes everything

A sermon given on the on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 21st March 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

John 12:20-33

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

I'm sure many of you will recognise those words from Dylan Thomas's poem, a poem about death, about not accepting death passively. For Thomas, struggling against death is a valiant action; for him, the best way to face death is with strength and power.

But compare those words of Thomas with the words of Jesus from today's gospel passage, "Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." A stark contrast to Thomas's words: those who clutch so tightly onto their life, their control, all that surrounds them will, in Jesus's words, lose their life; whereas those who surrender their life will gain life, eternal life.

Now, in the last 12 months, we have faced so much death, over 126,000 people in the UK alone have died from Covid-19. Alongside this, there have been so many other losses of so many kinds: lost opportunities; broken relationships; families kept apart. And that's why we are recognising on Tuesday, the National Day of Reflection, to offer us space to be still, to pray, to reflect on all that has happened in the last year.

With all that in mind you might think, 'Why shouldn't we follow Thomas in railing against death?' For those that have been fortunate enough to have received their covid vaccinations, there may even be a small sense of triumphalism: 'that's one in the eye for death' allowing ourselves just a small amount of raging against the dying of the light. And there's nothing wrong with celebrating life: life, after all, is a gift from God; each day we're given can be celebrated. Some might also say, and I think I'd agree with them, that the very fact that we have these vaccines at all and that they've been produced so quickly is a gift. And there's nothing wrong with celebrating that gift gratefully received.

But Jesus's words are challenging us in a different way. Is self-preservation, including the preservation of our own lives, the most important thing?

Cast your mind back for a moment to when we were all out on a Thursday night clapping for the NHS: was it that we were clapping for our doctors and nurses because they were saving us? Or I might suggest that our admiration come from a different place? Did it come from our recognition that, in the doctors and nurses serving whilst putting themselves at risk, they were showing us that there is something so much deeper and more significant than simply saving one's own life?

Jesus, knowing that the hour was coming for him to be glorified, that his journey towards the cross was nearly at an end, speaks of that more significant love, that more significant purpose: he was about to self-sacrificially lay down his life in order that we might live. But he also asks us to follow him in this way of the cross - "Whoever serves me must follow me", he said.

He uses this picture of a grain of wheat dying and out of that death, new life emerging, and there's more to that picture than at first may appear. If you imagine a single stalk of wheat, if that stalk of wheat was simply pushed to the ground, it's unlikely that it would be much of a return, much of a crop. Instead, the death of a grain that he describes is that the stalk must be reaped: it must be first cut down; the head of the wheat must be crushed and winnowed; air must be blown through it to separate the grain from the chaff; and having released the grain, when sown, a new harvest can emerge. There's a process of dying, of crushing, of stripping away before something new can be sown and eventually harvested - at points during that process, the grain doesn't even look like the head of wheat anymore - it's unfamiliar. So when Jesus uses this picture, there's a recognition that the death we are called to isn't just a passive experience. There has to be a willingness to be changed, to be winnowed, to be transformed.

Death, of course, is never easy or pain free.; Even the death of a certain way of life or a certain way of doing things isn't easy. It's so much easier to clutch on tightly to who we are, what we have and what we are familiar with to rally our defences and challenge any kind of death to a duel. But as Christians, we aren't called to a life of clutching; we're called to a life of letting go. To be a Christian is to put our lives in danger. Of course, for some in the world, this is quite literally the case. Like me, you may have seen the picture in the news of the nun, Sister Ann Rosa in Myanmar, walking forward towards the line of security forces who she feared were about to open fire on a group of protesters. In an interview

afterwards, she told reporters how she felt in that moment, "Today is the day I'm going to die." She was prepared to die to save protesters lives.

Now, we can be grateful that as Christians living in the UK, we are not called to risk our lives in such a way. However, we are still called to risk our lives. The working out of this may look different here, but we are not, as God's people, as Christ church, in the business of self-preservation. Instead, we are to be willing to give ourselves away, giving away what may be our reassuringly familiar way of life, giving it away for the benefit of others, but knowing that in doing that, new life and growth is possible. As Archbishop, William Temple, is often quoted, "The church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it."

So as we begin Passiontide this Sunday, when we remember our Saviour's journey towards death, through death, and the gift of new life, let's be challenged once again by his call to us. What is it that we clutched tightly on to? Where might we need to loosen grip? And where are we being governed by a fear of death rather than the promise of new life?

In the end, Thomas's poem isn't a poem about triumphing over death, but instead focuses upon how one might ultimately face the inevitable. And that, of course, is the key difference for us as Christians at Passiontide: Death has been defeated and that changes everything.

Reading Text

John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, 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. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. ²⁷ 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰ Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.