



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fifth Sunday of Lent

readings: [Jeremiah 31.31-34](#), [Hebrews 5.5-10](#), [John 12.20-33](#)

17 March 2024

Today we move into Passiontide. Our attention shifts onto those last few days of the life of Jesus and his death on a cross. 40% of St John's gospel concerns these days. Christians claim this to be the core story for our faith. We designate one week of the year as 'holy', setting it apart from all other weeks. Over the centuries artists, composers and writers have sought to get inside this story. Every year clergy (and maybe I just speak for myself) struggle to express the profundity of this. What does the death of Jesus mean? In John 12 we are given a very full reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death – glory, fruitfulness and judgement.

St John has the mindset of a poet or artist. He arranges his material in particular patterns. No words are wasted. Conversations begin at one level and disappear into the profound. He finds unexpected patterns of correspondence with the OT, particularly the psalms and festivals. He repeats key words – one of which is 'glory,' a word with the same root as 'glorify'. Naturally, he has his own take on the glory of God. So, to today's gospel reading.

The action happens, significantly, just before the festival of Passover. In John I we heard John the Baptist's cry, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world with all its Passover resonance.

It is also significant that Greeks have come up to Jerusalem for the festival to worship. They would have been welcomed into the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple. Like Philip and Nathanael from a Jewish background in Ch I, they seek Jesus out. There is a gathering happening that breaks down barriers. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

In addition, later on in John 12, we have quotes from Isaiah 52-53 which invite us to reimagine the glory of God through one who suffers on behalf of others. This is what is clearly in the mind of Jesus when the inquisitiveness of the Greeks triggers his response, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. It is the time for him to lay down his life for the sheep of this fold and other folds. And his soul is troubled, deeply troubled. He clearly believes that in some way his death is to have meaning within the purposes of God. And so, he prays, Father, glorify your name and the response I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again. What is about to happen will reveal the glory of God. The very idea that the glory of God is seen in what unravels at Golgotha was outrageous then, as it is now.

And yet, if glory reflects the nature of God then in Jesus the nature of God is One who gives everything without restraint that others may not only know what this God is like but become receivers of that God gift. Thou art God, whose arms of love aching, spent, the world sustain. (W H Vanstone) The essence, nature or glory of God is witnessed at Golgotha. This is the way God is. The one through whom all things were made, and who is the source of life, surrendered his life not because he had to but because he chose to. In that act the glory which is the flaming heart of the universe is revealed. (Lesslie Newbigin)

Take a few moments to contemplate such a God.

It is in the flow of that divine generosity that we receive the bread and the wine... Rowan Williams in characteristic style puts it like this. If you think what we receive in the eucharist is 'life, light and fire,' as the Orthodox Churches put it, it all feels rather different from a little piece of bread.

So, onto the image of fruitfulness. 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. Any gardener will recognise this. For the first time last year I gathered seeds from the previous year's sweet peas. I have already given plants away.

Stephen Verney does the maths for us on a grain of wheat— one seed of wheat may produce forty grains of wheat. Year 2 = 1600; year 3 = 64000; year 4 = over 1,5000,000; year 5 = over 100,000,000. One seed, if it falls into the ground and dies offers a gift that keeps giving. Jesus offers himself up that his life may come alive in hundreds, thousands and millions of others. And if Jesus' followers are going to pass on this life, then they too have to learn this pattern of generous living. That, Jesus says will require doing battle with our egos, letting go, a dying to, in order to receive back our life so that our lives and Christian communities can bear the divine fruitfulness in all its glorious dimensions.

Today is St Patrick's day. Patrick was captured in Britain by slave traders and taken to Ireland where he was sold as a slave. He worked as a shepherd, became a Christian in Ireland and then made his escape back to Britain. He seems to have had a divine vision inviting him to go back to Ireland and bring the Gospel to his former captors. He needed to die to his fear, anger and plans for a quiet life. Instead, he says yes and returns to face and forgive his former masters. This is the dynamic of fruitfulness.

The final dimension of the meaning of the death of Jesus is judicial. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. The cross is 'the decisive truth,' 'the dethroning of the ruler of this world.' Remember the gospels are written against a background of empire which brooks no opposition. Others suggest that the ruler of the world refers to a wider definition. These are the 'powers' which are the dynamics of evil, falsehood and death that are... systemic and can take hold of and shape human lives, communities and nations. (David Ford) That definition is broader and more subtle than just empire. It's about the politics of division, hate, control and self-aggrandisement. The lust for power in whatever form that is both insidious and brazen. All these powers will have the light shone on them by the lone figure on the cross. They are shown up for what they are. Public life is scrutinised by the light of the cross.

Here are three ways of understanding the meaning of the death of Jesus. It is about the visibility of the nature or glory of God; it is about divine fruitfulness, and it is about the unmasking of the powers. Immediately after our text it is clear that the crowd don't get it – they often don't, particularly in John's gospel. So, Jesus leaves them/us with a question. Will you live in the light or in the darkness where all meaning and direction is lost? What is your direction of travel? As we move towards Easter may the significance and meaning of the Cross shed its light on our paths and the life of the world for which Christ died.

Amen

The Very Revd Jerry Lepine