**17th March 2024
Hebrews 5.5-10** p. 196 **John 12.20-33** p.91 **When glorify meant crucify.**

I’ve been left in a few vestries in my time, especially as a visiting minister. It’s always intriguing seeing what’s on the walls, bookshelves and notice boards. You learn quite a lot about a church inside the minister’s vestry!

Sometimes the signage is quite perfunctory like *please turn off the lights when you leave.*I did, however, love the message, written in beautiful calligraphy, on one vestry door that led straight out into the sanctuary, the last thing any preacher would look at before taking a service, a message that read: *we would see Jesus.*Isn’t that super and what great words to see before leading a service, words that come from today’s gospel.

In John 12 we are meeting Jesus in his final days. He has so little time left yet, we sense, he is still unsure of whether or not his disciples really understand who he is and why he has come. Therefore, from now on there will be bite sized sayings from him which point to his death and resurrection. John 12 is one of these as he talks of his death.

My grandparents, perhaps like many of their generation, never talked of theirs. My grandmother once told me why. *If we never talk about it perhaps it will never happen.* She smiled as she said those words, so I appreciated the sentiment rather than the logic.

And it’s as Jesus speaks of his death that he is joined by new listeners, described as Gentiles by John.

They had sought out Philip, probably because he had a Greek name as they themselves may well have done. He in turn goes to Andrew, who eventually introduces them to Jesus.

In the first century world Greeks were famous for their enquiring minds. Indeed, one of the ancient writers put it this way: *You Athenians will never rest yourselves, nor will you let anyone else rest.* They were obviously the Tiggers of the ancient worldAn intriguing hypothesis has been put forward that as the cleansing of the temple took place in the Court of the Gentiles, maybe Greek seekers after truth were there, they had witnessed Jesus’ actions and now wanted to hear Jesus’ words.

What is clear is that this idea from Jesus that he was soon to die shocked those who heard it whether they were Greeks or Jews. Surely this wasn’t part of the script. It seems to have confounded their expectations to the point that some of the disciples even became bold enough to challenge Jesus and tell him he’d got it wrong.

Yet Jesus is adamant and will not budge saying that the *hour has come.*In today’s passage he uses the picture of a seed falling from a flower head into the soil. As its covered by the earth, for a time at least, it looks as if it has vanished and gone. The end. Yet come the days of spring and the return of warmth, that dead looking seed germinates, begins to grow and in time flourishes producing flower and fruit and eventually more seeds so that the cycle of life goes on.

That’s how Jesus talks of his death – like a seed falling into the ground. And in all of this, he says, the loving purposes of God will be glorified.

So, John has Jesus saying at least three things in today’s gospel. By welcoming these Gentiles it’s just another pointer to the inclusivity that is part of the DNA of Jesus’ message. Then, secondly, he is making this shocking statement that for him *glorification means crucifixion.* And, perhaps, thirdly, something that is unique to John’s gospel, Jesus is said to embrace all of this. Sure, in verse 27 he talks of his inner turmoil and makes that request, very similar to the one he ask in Gethsemani in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke: *Father, save me from this hour.* Yet, here in John Jesus doesn’t spend a night in prayer searching for a way forward, instead the second part of verse 27 brings all debate to an end as he says: *No, it was for this that I came to this hour.*And yet, I sense, we are still in some sort of shock, two thousand years on. The gospel, in so many of its parts, often seems topsy turvey, an upside-down paradox that blows our mind and sits uneasy with our culture. And that’s never more so than in Lent, Passiontide and on Good Friday.

For Jesus death wasn’t a defeat and failure, but the consequence of living a life of faithfulness and self-giving love.

Jesus was aware that such a message didn’t go down too well in a success driven society. It’s why he talks in these passages of hating, or rejecting, a way of life that is *me* centred.

A young pupil said more than he realised when asked what the grammatical definition of words are like *me and mine.* Instead of calling them possessive pronouns he labelled them *aggressive pronouns.*As the Son of Man, coming with a message that was humane, generous and loving, Jesus doesn’t cling to his ego aggressively but talks of his life being like a seed that falls to the ground and dies.

I read a bible commentator who has only recently taken up gardening, for whom this passage, he says, now makes so much more sense. He says now he has gone through a few years’ worth of seasons he understands how important death and decay are in the horticultural world. Plants, he says, teach us about resurrection.

Now our other reading set for today is from the New Testament book specifically addressed to new Jewish Christians in the early church called Hebrews. It’s a mysterious addition to the canon of Scripture because it has an unknown author, it isn’t technically a letter yet starts like one and it has some of the best Greek in the entire bible.

Verse 8 of chapter 5 chimes in with today’s gospel when that unknown author writes: *he learned obedience through suffering.*This is a picture of Jesus as the wounded healer or the empathetic priest. Someone who didn’t merely tell us the way but showed us the way.

And that was important for these new Christians because by AD 80, the time Hebrews was written, their world was a tough one with persecution all around them. So, the message is don’t give up and keep on believing in this Jesus shaped God.

I mentioned earlier in this sermon the sense of shock Jesus’ original hearers seem to have had when first told of our Lord’s cross.

And I suspect, we all get shocked from time to time at suffering in all its forms. A terminal illness can seem so unjust. A war appears to us such an evil waste of life. A broken relationship may be for us beyond our understanding.

And then there is the shock that some ideals we hold as being good and honourable are not embraced by others and we are mystified why we might be misrepresented.

At times of struggle our shock sometimes manifests itself with an idea that has probably crept into all our minds from time to time that God seems absent. I think both John and the writer of Hebrews are aware of that tendency on our part and are trying to say to us today God is always present, even at a time of the worst violence or the deepest deprivation. And the obverse of so much pain and struggle is love and compassion. 2 sides of life exemplified and personified in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, take heart even as you see the seed fall into the ground for there will be a spring and a flower again.

I’d like to finish today with a poem by a bible commentator I love to read, William Loader. He is a New Zealander who has spent most of his teaching life as a university lecturer in Australia. He often writes with the deepest insights and here are some of them, based on today’s gospel in the form of a poem:

*The seed has fallen.
For a moment I saw it lying upon the earth,
But now it is gone,
Disappeared in the dark earth,
Hidden from view,
Invisible in the depths,
As though swallowed up
Under the trampled earth,
My trampling,
My seeking,
My looking.
Let it go.
It is but a seed,
Irrecoverable in the silence of death,
The silence of death which lies beneath our feet.

And if I wait or return to this place,
It may come again with angels,
Pressing upward to embrace the light
And smile new beginnings to the sky.
And from my feet
I would feel the new life rising up
Through my body,
Filling my heart,
Giving life to my breathing,
Turning my mind to peace and love,
Rising beyond me to celebrate hope,
To push aside the powers of injustice,
To proffer the birds a shelter,
A place of renewal,
A place of feeding,
Nourished with new seed,
The mystery of grace.
“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”*

Thanks be to God. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 15th March 2024*