

Sermon - Dying to live

John 12.20-33

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever 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.²⁸Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' ³⁰Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

There are certain things which we would prefer not to talk about – things that don't make good conversation at dinner time – sex, politics and religion of course – but I rather suspect beyond those conversational no-gos is the champion of impolite small talk – which is death and dying.

Death is rarely something we deal with well. We want to deny it - ignore it - avoid it.

Death is often simply too much for us.

This past year we have had to live under the shadow of death – our restrictions and lockdowns are to keep people alive but the cost has still been huge. For many of us the numbers of covid deaths are hard for us to grapple with. Perhaps it is easier to shut it out.

Sometimes a death provides something we do talk about - there are points in our recent history which have seen huge outpourings of grief on an international and national level – when Princess Diana, George Floyd and most recently Sarah Everard died – many have been driven by the gathering momentum of the injustice of the circumstances of their deaths and grief and anger has led to cries for justice.

I am always mindful in these situations that there are many others whose violent or untimely deaths have gone without the same fanfares. Why is that?

This week in our church - we will be laying Carl to rest – and it feels agonising to have to say goodbye to someone in our church family in this way – you don't need me to tell you that the death of our loved ones is utterly visceral and painful for us.

Our own death is also scary. So much so we have an obsession with staying young and a hugely profiting beauty business which just has to mention "age defying" to sell its products.

And beyond the death of our bodies, we struggle with anything that we mourn as a loss – a relationship break up, a lost position or feeling of status, lost health – these are things we find so difficult... generally they aren't great topics of dinner party conversation either - they are difficult

but they are made even harder as we exist in a culture which is obsessed with the promotion of being happy, feeling good, and avoiding difficult realities. No one wants to think about or talk about death.

Christianity, however, bucks the trend – we hear about death rather a lot – we have to engage with it and live it in some way – following Jesus means participating in not only the life of Jesus but also his death and then his resurrection.

Jesus says: 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.*

Unlike polite society, Jesus demands us to look death in the face.

Jesus puts the spotlight on 'dying' and its spiritual significance.

When we come to Holy Week and Easter we remember that death comes first – it never surprises me that we have more people for Easter than Good Friday – its simply difficult to sit with the misery.

But it was the pain and fear and loneliness of death that Jesus chose to share with us. There isn't a single part of our thinking about death that Jesus cannot understand because he goes there with us. He was there before us.

And the greatest of all mysteries is that Jesus showed that the way to true life is with him and through his death.

To the extent we avoid death we avoid life – true living.

I think that there is a relationship with our fear of dying and our fear to be fully alive.

The fear and avoidance of death can be what lies underneath our other fears - What if I fail, lose, look stupid? What if I get hurt? What if things don't go the way I want them to? What if I lose the person I most need and love?

Can you see that these fears are very similar to the reservations people sometimes say are preventing them from trusting Jesus?

If we pay attention to our anxieties and fears we can be inhibited from being fully alive – and this separates and isolates us from truly living – with God, one another, and ourselves.

By glossing over the difficult bits we will be stopped from bearing fruit.

Jesus calls us to be a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. Because it is in the dying that we have the potential to bear much fruit. It is in the total surrender and dying that new life can emerge. There are many things which need to die in our church and society – the death of unkindness, the death of prejudice, the death of hate, the death of mean-spiritedness, the death of self-centredness – all of these deaths will bear much fruit.

Now, please don't think that I am saying we should be blasé about death. We do not deny the pain and fear. Jesus did not deny any of the fear and horror of death. He wept in the presence of death and was angry in the face of death and was fearful in the face of death. We know the impact that death has in our lives and in society and in the world.

I am saying that we can face up to thinking and talking about death.

Despite the struggles and the brokenness we have hope that God's love has the power to heal, resurrect and enable human flourishing. We have the power to bear much fruit.

Amen