

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 119
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

As a grain of wheat: whoever serves me must follow me.

Sir, we would see Jesus. This simple question is the context for a turning point in the Gospel of John at which Jesus declares, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” On three previous occasions John shows that Jesus’ hour had **not** come. What changed? The chief sign is that Lazarus had been raised from the tomb and, as a consequence, the leaders began plotting in earnest to take Jesus’ life. The raising of Lazarus is the last of the signs, which begin with the wedding at Cana, and include the healing of the man born blind. These signs make it clear that the power of God’s self-giving love has been at work in the life and ministry of Jesus. In the sequence preceding the appearance of the Greeks there is a new twist. Jesus was anointed by Mary as if for death, and entered the city riding on a donkey. All this points beyond the present to hint at what it will now mean for him to embody God’s self-giving love to the world. In imagery that reminds us of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, Jesus’ glory will be revealed in him being lifted up in an act of total self-surrender to the will of God. His exaltation will not consist in triumphing over the worldly powers of church and state ranged against him: he will not drive out the Romans and ascend to political power. Instead, the lifting up will reveal his profound humility: his utmost self-giving to the all-embracing love of God.

How, then, do the Greeks come to stand on the threshold of this hour? They are part of a problem the religious leaders had. Their malicious plans for Jesus were temporarily rendered powerless, because: “the world had gone after him.” People were finding Jesus mysteriously attractive. Even people from outside the fold, the Greeks, had got the message and wanted to see for themselves. The love of God is not confined to a race or a place. It draws all nations to the place where the God’s embodied self-communication is at work in the world. It is significant that the Greeks do not actually see Jesus. As yet, Jesus is hardly understood by those around him because, the hour which has arrived has yet to be fulfilled. Up to this point the world hardly knows what to make of self-giving-love. But soon it will be made clear.

As usual, John’s take on this is highly nuanced. Jesus’ lifting up to be with God - his glorification - is linked with an opposite movement: the idea of a seed, which must fall into the earth and die before it brings forth fruit. This involves a terrible risk. Malice is on the increase. Malevolent forces begin to converge, bent on Jesus’ destruction. The deepest challenge awaits and the question is: will Jesus continue to trust? Will he allow himself to die and fall into the deep soil of God’s steadfast love? *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but it if dies...* We know that even after being kept in sterile circumstances for millennia, seeds which are planted can yield fruit. While they are seeds they are nothing. If they cease to be seeds, they live. The image takes us into the meaning of the cross. It is in his refusal to save his life, that Jesus receives life in a form no one can take from him. It is in Jesus’ total self-

giving - his refusal to glorify himself - that God's power of life is revealed, and a new way of life is seeded in the world.

As a grain of wheat - whoever serves me must follow me. This is a call to embark on the same journey, to enter into deep discipleship and engage in an act of self-transcendence. It is to let go of all securities, and encounter the most deeply de-stabilizing moment in human experience. Jesus himself felt the power of this risk when he prayed in the manner of Gethsemane: "Now my soul is troubled." How could he know whether his faithfulness to death will result in anything? The voice in reply, heard by some as thunder and some as the voice of an angel, shows that revelation is always ambiguous and people have different abilities to perceive its meaning. The presence of the voice, even if misunderstood, means that self-giving love will not remain silent in the world.

When the pattern of the narrative here in John is compared with the other Gospels it reveals that the point in the story when the Greeks appear corresponds with the moment when Jesus cleanses the Temple and says: *my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations!* The presence of the Greeks in John, then, is a protest against limiting God's grace and mercy to one people. *As a grain of wheat* means God's people - Israel and the church - are not meant to hold on to the life they have been given. Rather they are meant to risk loss and death, so that new life may come forth for all the world.

As a grain of wheat - also challenges the disciples who are bound to share his journey and repeat the pattern we see here. They participate in the same soul shaking sacrifice through which God the Father seeks to draw all things together in love. Their seed of self-giving is to be part of the coming season of fruitfulness. This does not mean participating in an ultimately tragic scenario. It means being part of God's new act of triumph, which comes through the agency of humility and trust, rather than worldly power. [The Midwives whose story is commemorated in the sculpture lived like that.] By just this means God works bring forth a harvest of life and light in a world of darkness. By the power of humility is the usurper disempowered and cast out. The challenge for those who live in the sight of God's love is to live in what they have received, to become flesh and blood translators of this truth for others. It means allowing the hope we live in to enter into the world through us, so that there is a harvest of hope for others.

As a grain of wheat - affects us personally, and as a congregation, and as Hotham Parish, meeting for our AGM today. A person who attended a recent church growth conference wrote: "a church without mission is a friendship group, nothing more. A church not built on... Christ has nothing to offer." As a Parish we have the gifts of faith, love and hope. We have the Word of God and the Sacraments, and resources. All these are life giving and nourishing. *As a grain of wheat* asks of us a question: are we holding onto our gifts in such a way that they remain hidden and alone, or are we active in letting them bring life to others? Is our Parish a barn where the gifts of God are stored, or is it more like a warehouse, from which God's gifts are freely shared with the world.

As we near Easter, let us remember that this key feast is a celebration of Jesus who acted as a grain of wheat to show us who God is. And it is a celebration of God who did not keep life buried in a tomb. God showed us who Jesus is by allowing self-giving love to transcend death, letting it loose for all the world to share.