

## **Lent 5 – Hebrews 5.5-10 and John 12.20-33**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we progress through the season of Lent, the cross comes ever closer and today, as we enter Passiontide, we hear Jesus' words, spoken to those outside of the community of faith. Jesus said to the Gentiles who wanted to know more about him, he said:

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground 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.” v24 & 25

Here is one of those statements which summarises how the Gospel writer, John, understands Jesus and his work. It is a work of great sacrifice. It is a work of self-emptying and giving of his all, so that fruit may come.

It is a simple, yet powerful, picture, is it not, of Jesus and his work? The seed that is buried, deep in the ground, can only bear fruit if it is first buried. It is similar to the lives of those who seek to live for ever, it is only possible if they let go of all that they have and having sacrificed their life find that they are blessed by the gift of eternal life.

Yes, Jesus is describing himself and his work but he is also pointing us to the path that we too are invited to travel: the path of self-emptying; of sacrificial service and of holding lightly to this life that we might then receive the gift of eternal life.

On Tuesday this week we reach the first anniversary of the original lockdown and, along with Marie Curie and many hundreds of organisations and charities, we are invited to share in a National Day of Reflection.

A lot has happened in these past 12 months and a lot has been on hold or happened partially. But one thing that has happened, in this last year, is that we have become much more aware of the personal sacrifice of many front-line and key workers. Those in the NHS and caring professions; those in the emergency services; those in food retail and the logistics which enable food to be in the shops; those scientists and laboratory technicians; teachers and council workers and many, many others.

In this past year we have become much more aware of the personal sacrifice, courage, commitment, and dedication of those who have enabled so many services to continue, even though disrupted sometimes.

The National Day of Reflection will give us an opportunity to be thankful to the many people who have put the needs of others above their own and served us with sacrificial generosity. We will honour, in the quiet of our homes, those who have followed in the footsteps of Jesus, knowingly or unknowingly, and given so generously to us all.

We will also, on Tuesday, have the opportunity to remember those who are no longer with us because their time came, and, for some, came earlier than may have been expected, because of the virus. And we will pray that the fruit of their life will continue to blossom and bless us.

The Gospel is consistent about the invitation to lay down our lives in the service of others and that, in so doing, we find that we receive much more in return.

Every time you or I choose to give sacrificially of our time, our money, our abilities and energies, we know that we are following the path of Jesus, who gave everything for us all.

Those of us who have been following the Lent course, following the Diocesan 'Rhythm of Life' material, were asked the question, this last week: "are we known as a generous Christian community?"

It's a good and challenging question. Those of us who discussed this, had no hesitation in acknowledging that we wanted to be a generous Christian community, and we were able to give examples of the ways in which we felt that we were, but I think some of us left with the sense that, perhaps, we might, be more sacrificial in our giving of our time, our monies and abilities and energies than we currently are.

The Way of Jesus is the Way to life but as we journey together, these next two weeks, we will share betrayal, injustice, physical beating, and a tortured death. Jesus pioneered the Way to life and calls us to follow him. It's a downward path so that we may be lifted up in the end. It's a path of humility, a path of self-emptying, of being misunderstood, of being marginalised. Will you follow Jesus to the cross and beyond? Will you stand with him and share his journey?

This path of letting go of our own egos and our own ambitions; the path leads us to sweat drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemene and to be betrayed by those we trust and to be disowned by those who are close and to be unfairly tried and beaten.

If you are looking for the power of the resurrection, you need first to experience the power of the cross. There is no path to the surprised joy of Easter Day that does not go through the depths of Good Friday and the emptiness of Holy Saturday first.

Today we begin a significant annual pilgrimage. It's a pilgrimage of Grace and of discovery and here we are again, at the beginning of it. Yes, there will be distractions, as there always will be. Yes, there will be temptations to take short-cuts, as there always will be. But let us, travel together, and learn together in this Passiontide, and be renewed in faith and hope together.

You might like to sign up for the 'Walking the Way of the Cross' podcast from the Church of England website to help shape your journey over these next 15 days.

Isaac Watts, the hymn -writer, wrote most of his hymns in his early 20's. They were published just over 10 years later, in the first years of the 18th century. His hymn, 'When I Survey The Wondrous Cross', is a meditation on the extent of Jesus' sacrifice for the whole created order on the cross. The hymn ends, with those well-known words: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

As we give thanks for all those that have so generously and selflessly sacrificed for others during this past year, may we, in turn, find ways of following Jesus, and becoming more like him, in his sacrificial generosity.

Amen.