

I wonder if there is anything in life that you hate? One thing I hate, is the seemingly unending cough which is a distinguishing feature of this winter's bugs, and which I am struggling to shake off, so apologies in advance for any interruptions.

I am pleased to tell you that there is a great deal more in my life that I love dearly; my wife and children, this church, family and friends; I love my job in the art world, I love nature, music, cinema...I could go on, so it is initially difficult to hear Christ declaring, in our gospel reading, that we should hate our life.

As always context is vital; the imagery of the wheat kernel producing many seeds in death is a clear metaphor of our salvation bought by Christ's sacrifice - with the benefit of hindsight, we know what Jesus is talking about. But for those closest to him, the idea of him dying, and furthermore that death is the principle reason for his life, is too mysterious and awful to contemplate. With his striking language, including the word hate, and echoed by a voice from heaven, Christ is advocating something far greater than this earthly existence.

We often hear the phrase, 'in the end' – it reveals a sobering truth that everything in our human life has limitations and, however important something may be to us, if we set our stall on earthly things alone, that will be the extent of our experience. The ultimate limitation is our mortality and it is often said that grief is the price we pay for love. One cannot exist without the other; and I think this apparent contradiction applies to all that matters most to us on earth. The happiest of relationships require effort and compromise; however satisfying a job may be it will almost certainly involve pressure and stress, and while children are the greatest of blessings, they also cause a lifetime of worry, precisely because parents love them so much. I think the conclusion must be that nothing really worthwhile comes without sacrifice – and there is nothing more worthwhile than serving God. Rather than the inherent limitations of our earthly life, following Christ gives us the chance to exist forever in a place described in Revelation where there 'will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain.'

I must just share something that happened when I was writing that last paragraph a few weeks ago. It was late in the evening and my daughter Evie, called down and asked for a glass of water; when I got to her bedroom, she was in that lovely state between wakefulness and sleep, she had no idea that I had been writing my sermon, let alone making the point that nothing good comes without sacrifice when out of the darkness she said 'Dad, I have just thought of something, 'you can't enjoy being in bed, without first climbing the stairs.' Bless the child for all they can teach us.

Returning to our gospel, the kernel seed metaphor is one of many, based on nature and growth, that Christ uses to describe his relationship with us – perhaps most famously, 'I am the vine, you are the branches'. Vines, branches and kernels of wheat must live and grow before they die and produce seed. Our choice is whether we live this life, and grow, for ourselves, or for God?

The hymn 'Be though my vision' gives us clear guidance, dealing explicitly with the question of earthly versus heavenly priorities, 'Nought be all else to me, save that thou art.' But there

is another particular line that is worth considering, 'thou my inheritance now and always.' The key word is now...how we live our lives today, and our Psalm reading tells us to 'seek him with all our heart that he may teach us his decrees.' In doing so, slowly but surely we will gain His wisdom, something which is pertinently described in Proverbs chapter 4 like a loving relationship. But just like the relationships I have described, it is one that does not come cheap; 'Get wisdom, though it cost you all you have, get understanding; cherish her and she will exalt you; embrace her and she will honour you.'

Consider our eucharistic prayer - 'heaven and earth are full of your glory'. If we seek and submit to God in all aspects of our life, he will reveal himself to us. Furthermore in Hebrews 13 he promises, 'to equip us with everything good for doing his will.' And each of us are equipped in different ways. There is a touching scene in the film Chariots of Fire that illustrates this well. As many of you will know, one the central characters, Eric Lidell won the 400m at the 1924 Paris Olympics, having refused to run and sacrificed his favoured 100 metres because the heats took place on a Sunday; and he reconciles the apparent conflict between Godly and earthly pursuits - 'I believe that God made me for a purpose, to serve him as a missionary in China, but he also made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.'

Now we may not be Olympic medallists but in our own individual ways, whether our abilities are spiritual, pastoral, financial, musical, even floral - all these and more God-given talents can be employed to glorify Him and serve each other in this life. And if I may I would like to pay tribute to one person in particular. It is a great pleasure to welcome people to church on Sunday mornings and I was always inspired by the arrival of our dear departed friend Pauline - in spite of physical discomfort, and the effects of age, come frost, snow, rain or shine, she trooped through those doors, and every time she did so, without fail, she would put a few coins in the collection plate. Just like the widow who gave all she had in Luke Chapter 21, what made it so powerful was that Pauline displayed this quiet determination without a hint of self-consciousness - she was certainly not seeking anyone's 'empty praise' to quote our hymn again. Her motivation was to humbly worship God, to give of herself, and in doing so was a kernel opened, providing lasting encouragement and example to us all.

I would like to leave you with some lines by the great American poet Walt Whitman. Whitman had a complex faith, he believed in God and respected religions of all kinds without subscribing to a particular one. In his 1892 poem 'O Me, O Life' he describes a meaningless, spiritual wasteland here on earth - '...Of Endless trains of the faithless, Of cities filled with the foolish...Of eyes that vainly crave the light, Of the objects mean.' And he goes on to question what he or any of us can do to counter this - 'What good amid these, O Me, O life', but concludes with an answer that I hope encapsulates what I have been trying to say: 'That you are here - that life exists and Identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.' Amen.

Michael Grist, 17 March 2024