

Hymns: 87 Praise to the Living God
 306 Now the Green Blade Rises
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Readings: Psalm 46
 Jeremiah 31.31-34
 John 12.20-33

“Confessions of a Reluctant Grain of Wheat”

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Jesus said, ‘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.’

So I was joking with a minister friend about this on Wednesday evening, catching up with him and his wife – they are ok, but they have had a bad year. What they hoped for has fallen into the earth and died, properly.

The grain has fallen into the earth, and frankly, they’ve not seen any fruit.

My friend said if I was going to preach about the grain of wheat and have some truth, I should add a further note from him about the promised fruit:

‘...that fruit better be a BLESSED BIG sheaf of wheat.’

Except he didn’t say blessed.

We were laughing, and I said I probably wouldn’t use the word he’d said, from the pulpit, so he suggested another word.

Which I’m not going to say either.

The point is, it isn’t just Jesus who can say his ‘soul is troubled’ by this hard, paradoxical teaching. And he did, right in verse 27.

He said: 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.’

It always reassures me when we see Jesus himself grappling with the deep truths of the human condition. Working out what to do and how to think about what is happening.

It counsels us to grapple right along with him. Wrestle with the text and join the conversation. Because this conversation still going on, these two thousand years later, and now we join our voices today right along with Jesus' own.

These verses – Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life – unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it will remain just a single grain; but if it dies, it will bear much fruit – these verses speak of the deep paradox of the cross and resurrection.

In our following Jesus, we are to live in a sacrificial way. We do, on occasion, choose a path of suffering, or certainly of less material pleasure as the world measures it, if it brings healing or peace in the world. And what a privilege to do that, when we can. When some simple action on our part can be the agent of new life.

I am convinced we are never to despise the good things of life in this world, (Jesus did not) and we are to hold them lightly – borrowed for a time and used as seed, love, warning.

Sometimes we remain in suffering that does not bring healing we can see, but where to do anything else but to remain would deny the good and grace and blessing we know in Christ.

Sometimes to the end.

I know this, you do. We have seen people do it. And we get it about the grain of wheat – of course it has to lose its entire self, to have its heart break and hull breached from the inside as life pushes out into who knows what, stretching in cold earth toward the sun.

We get it. What is a grain of wheat for, if not to die and grow.

What are our lives for, if not to glory in all that brings abundant life – to serve God, and be part of God's kingdom right now, and find our life eternal in God's among the many dwelling places of God's house, to quote John 14.

We get it. And, if Jesus could say his soul was troubled by this, so can we.

Because if I'm the grain of wheat, and cannot even imagine the earth, let alone what the grown plant will be like – if I'm that little grain of wheat dying is a great loss. And up till the moment I fall into earth that shell which has to be lost, be grown through – it has been blessing and everything. Without its protection the meat and nub in me would have no chance – my fear at losing my protective shell is grounded in having depended on it!

Just as the eggshell is everything, the whole and necessary world to the chick inside - until it isn't.

And Jesus says, should I then say, 'Father save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.' A grain is meant for growing. In the miracle of its growth, God is glorified.

The thing is, not every loss feels like a grain of wheat ready to grow. Jesus' own death did not feel like a victory to his disciples, and the loss of what we love most does not to us.

Loss does not always bring healing, sometimes it just brings suffering. And even if known by God and counted and never lost, suffering does not always bring conspicuous redemption. Not all grains of wheat fall into good earth and bring forth fruit.

They are more likely to, if surrounded by warmth, and love, and kindness – and not just talking personal suffering here, but global – social and durable – new life is more likely to come out of loss if it is attended gently by doctors, and wise politicians and economists, nurses and teachers.

The large scale social suffering of a people, of a whole destroyed nation is more likely to lead to new life if it is accompanied by resources like new roads and education, clean water and good harvests.

So I find myself a reluctant grain of wheat. And I don't want to be. I want to fall into the earth and look for the new life that changes me entirely.

Of course, Jesus is not just talking about suffering and loss among humanity, here. He is talking about God's choice to break God's very self open to be able to be in humanity – to be among us. And in the end it is this that makes the redemption of all our other losses possible. Because of this, new life comes from ravaged lands, and bombed schools, and even in our own hearts.

What if we were to think of God as the grain of wheat?

You have to know God's purpose is greater than just being all powerful and safe up in the sky or under the earth or wherever else – God's purpose is not to be some removed creator who set the world running and watches it burn – God seeks to plant God's very self in the earth and is willing to break Godself to do it.

Is this not exactly what the glorification of God in Jesus Christ means – God refusing to stay a safe and sterile grain of wheat, writing a law of love not to stay on tablets of stone, but that will grow in the very fibre of our bodies?

Here we turn to the prophet Jeremiah. We read this verse at Covenant Sunday, as Methodists. When we reconfirm our full abandonment in God's love at the beginning of the year.

And as we commit ourselves to fall into God's love – we expect to find God with us. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the old one – I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts and the rest.

I am listening to Jesus with new ears. Jeremiah promises us a new, larger imagination – to see beyond, even if just in glimpses – the hull which defines the edge of our world, as we think of ourselves as grains of wheat.

Here is something we all know. Times in life come that are all about loss. Times come in life that require the words I don't use in church to describe their offence, their horror – the words exist for a reason and they SHOULD cause offence. Because they describe situations that offend the heart of our loving, powerful God.

Times like my minister friend and his wife have had this past year, the one who I started out talking about. And I listen to Jesus and I hear reassurance – nothing will be lost – all things are remembered, all will grow to harvest – and you can't begin to imagine it, and Jesus says I will break too, and God will be glorified.

Ah, for the security of the child at play on its mother's lap, to know such confidence and walk with such grace. Ah for the imagination of the prophet, that would let me, a simple grain of wheat, see what fruit may come from my falling into earth. Because we will all fall to earth, it is what grain is for.

Friends, we are in Lent, we are in the time of preparation, we are getting ready to walk with Jesus as he enters Jerusalem in triumph, hailing him with Palms next week in our service here – then to the cross, and into the tomb. We are here from all over the world, in all parts of our different journeys together in this moment, here.

Grapple with Jesus with these ideas – think on them deeply – there will come moments, glimpses of knowing a way a new way beyond the truths we take as self-evident.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.... Come, behold the works of the Lord; ...he makes wars to cease, to the end of the earth, he breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the shields with fire. Be still, and know that I am God.... The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.