

Sermon – 21st March 2021, Lent 5.

John 12: 20-33



Today we begin Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent before Holy Week. But the events in today's reading from St John's gospel occur after Palm Sunday which at first seems a little incongruous. So why does our church lectionary place them there?

I think it is because Jesus' words can help us not just in our personal Lenten reflections, but also as churches congregations serving the community where the Lord has placed us.

The Bible passage begins with people who are on the outside the community of faith, looking in: John records for us this incident where some Greeks arrive seeking an audience with Jesus. It seems they were in Jerusalem having come to worship at the Jewish temple. Probably the moral code and monotheism of Judaism appealed to them, and contrasted with their own culture of worshipping many gods and moral excesses. But Gentiles were only permitted in the outer courts of the Jewish temple, finding themselves excluded from the

more 'holy places'. So they were kind of welcome, but in carefully qualified way. And with that cautious mindset we find them seeking Jesus. Interestingly they don't feel they can go direct, but approach Philip and Andrew. This is probably because Philip and Andrew had Greek names, and so the Greeks probably thought they would be the disciples most receptive to their request. We don't find out what is said when they meet Jesus, but what John records for us is the short parable that Jesus gave as his reply. I want to suggest to you that Jesus' words speak not only into their situation, but also ours today. Jesus uses an illustration that is as timeless as it is familiar: a single seed, falling to the ground and dying, but in time springing forth with new life, to rise once again. So what meaning can that possibly have for us today?

Have you ever watched 'Escape to the country' or 'Relocation, Relocation' on TV? In one episode, a young couple were looking for a new home. They lived in London in a very up-market apartment with lots of wine bars and nice shops and restaurants nearby, they both had really good jobs in London and earnt a lot of money. They enjoyed their lives even though they were rather hectic. A daughter was born and they had decided that the baby daughter was not going to change their lives at all! But of course, she did, they could not do the things they had done before and they realised they did not want to, because they began to see the shallowness in them, that they were not that important compared with the love they had for their a baby girl. They concluded they needed more room, a garden, to have more time with her. They also felt they needed a different

lifestyle to bring up their daughter than the one they had thought they wanted, and still in many ways did not want to lose. When Kirsty and Phil caught up with them in their new life in the country some time later, they could not be happier, they had left the rat race, wandered along the beach with their daughter, fed ducks and saw the world through her eyes as the wonderful place it is. Yes, they had fewer material possessions but they had a new purpose and you could say, a new life. You also could say that happiness found them unexpectedly, when they had spent so long looking for it other places.

This is exactly the type of illustration Jesus is providing in John's gospel, he says in v25: *'the person who loves their life will lose it, and those who hate their life will find it'*. Jesus is saying that it is possible to be consumed by the things that we are convinced are right to pursue, only to find in periods of deeper reflection they are shallow and not life-giving. In fact there is a danger - instead of us being consumers, the desire for these things can start to consume us. Just like the Greeks that came seeking Jesus, who had tried their own culture of many gods and loose morals, and found that it just didn't satisfy. Sure, it gave them temporary gratification, but it was not life-giving. When we choose to let go of the fake happiness that the world offers, we're like that seed that has died to the world's offer and found newness of life in following Christ. This gives us a deeper sense of contentment and fulfilment and also a sense of direction and purpose. Like the Greeks and that young couple, we look back at our previous life, knowing that those things we pursued never fully satisfied, and there was a shallowness to them.

Rev. Andrew Hiscox

There is one final point to make. St John contrasts the more humble and honest seeking nature of the Greeks with the rebuttal and criticism Jesus received from the established faith community, for the very next passage in John's gospel is entitled: *'the Jews continue in unbelief'*. Irony is intended here, in that those who were outsiders came honestly seeking and with open hearts; but those who were insiders, long-standing members of the community of faith, turned to critique and refusal to accept Jesus' ministry. So the dying and rising of the seed illustration can apply to those on the inside, as well as those on the outside. Where might we need this in our churches today, for those of us who are on the inside? Now we don't know what happened with these Greeks who had made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But we do know that St Paul later on was able to go on to found vibrant new faith communities in Greece, in Athens and Corinth, because some of the books in the New Testament are St Paul's letters to these new churches, which he writes as their pastor. They were humble enough to let go of some longstanding things that they'd perhaps let consume them. In our Lenten preparations, what is Jesus inviting us to release hold of, to stop consuming us, and to begin afresh?