

22 March 2015 Hebrews 5:5-10 and John 12:20-33

A friend of mine experienced a number of significant upheavals in her life last year, which have resulted in her moving half way across the country. She is now in a new home, in a new community and in a new job. She is settling in, learning to grow where she is planted. It is a mix of pleasure in exploring new places, making new friends and the frustration of nothing being quite as she would like it. She can do something about some of that, but has realised that she might have to learn to live with the rather odd rules at the local golf club. Of the things she can influence, the house needs a lot of attention and there is also a very overgrown garden, the bones of which are a much neglected (and large) rockery. She has now removed all the long grass and is waiting to see what comes up and is planning on what she might add to enhance it once she has seen the seasons round. She is hoping that there will be long dormant seeds that will be inspired by the light and space they now have to burst into life.

Jesus uses the image of seeds when talking about 'his time'. He describes how unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, there can be no fruit from it. His death will, while looking like a tragedy, actually be the means of bringing a rich harvest, of bringing all people into communion with God. God will be glorified by Jesus' death. But we hear that Jesus is troubled by the knowledge of what is to happen to him. Jesus who healed the sick, turned water into wine, made blind men see, had compassion on women whom society had rejected, who even raised Lazarus to life, Jesus was deeply troubled by what was to come. In the other three gospels we only see Jesus troubled in the Garden of Gethsemane, here we are given an earlier glimpse of the internal wrestling that is going on within him. The passage from Hebrews adds to this picture. It tells us that Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death. And Jesus concludes that though there is danger, he is totally committed to doing whatever is needed to bring about the glory of God. He knows that it is only through confronting and living (and dying) with that danger, rather than sliding past it, that the glory will shine out to the whole world.

And God does what he did at the moment of Jesus' baptism, he affirms Jesus. He speaks, and is heard either as thunder or as an angel. The affirmation is for the sake of those listening, not for Jesus. It is for our sake. The objective of glorifying God has been the controlling feature of Jesus' life.

And we too can use the image of seeds when looking at our own walk with God. Sometimes I think I want to walk in the Garden of Eden without having also walked in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus warns us that if we follow him then we will be asked to stop our endless focus on our own preference and instead to focus on Jesus. That is what is meant by the use of 'hating our lives'. It's not about hatred on an absolute scale.

We can all, I'm sure, think of the way we favour our own preferences and even manipulate others to try and ensure that we get our own way as much as possible. I've recently had a holiday which was mainly about my preferences. The friend I travelled with is happy to have a holiday delivered to her ready made and so what we did and saw was mainly down to me. I did try to think of what she might enjoy, it wasn't entirely selfish, but I think at times it probably did border on it! In a way that's quite a benign example. It becomes less so when we try to impose our will while disguising it as: this is what Jesus would have done. I do have quite a few conversations with old friends with whom I have matured as a Christian about the things we learnt in our youth and what part they still play in our lives. To what extent were we following our own need for rules, discipline and boundaries rather than experiencing Jesus' compassion? To what extent were we then unable to be graciously loving to those who didn't meet our rather harsh standards? And never even start on those who had a need to worship differently from us!

I wonder what are the seeds from those early years of Christian growth that have fallen into the earth that is my life? Which of those represent the dreams, hopes, aspirations that have died?

Which of those have flourished in the dark place of lost dreams and have put forth totally different growth from that which I expected? What is currently falling that will grow into some amazing? Or what do I think is growing that might not flourish? Maybe that's a bit too much like navel gazing. For of course while we might transplant and pot up and plant out our tender seedlings, we don't keep digging them up just to see how they are doing. So therefore I should just get on with focussing on Jesus, learning to stop focussing on my personal preferences.

But how does one do that? I've been dipping into a rather wonderful book by Kathleen Norris called the Cloister Walk. She's a poet and so has a wonderful gift for language. She explores her experiences of spending time in a Benedictine Community in Minnesota. I came across the book in while browsing in the central library one wet lunchtime and now have a rather dogeared second hand copy. She writes about the liturgy that the Benedictines have been experimenting with for fifteen hundred plus years and in one long section describes her response to the paradox of the psalms. The way anger, fear, frustration and joy are all thrown together. The way she realises that if so many generations have found solace in them then she might do too. But that the communal recitation of the psalms is often disconcerting for my generation and those younger, raised as we have been in a culture that 'idolises individual experience'. It's difficult to 'recite a lament when in a good mood or to sing a hymn of joy when in pain'.

Yet when we worship together the merely personal or individual experience should be bound up into the communal aspect of our worship. In the baptism service, the parents and godparents promise to support the child in public worship and private prayer. When we come together on a Sunday we are involved in something that goes beyond our personal preferences, goes beyond private prayer. It is a communal act. It is an act that crosses cultural boundaries. I remember being in a tiny church in China and being able to follow the flow of the service as it was along liturgical lines. Then there was a familiar hymn – well the tune was – so I sang the words I already knew. A lovely lady in front of me when we got to the next hymn gave me her hymn book. Unfortunately I didn't know the tune and couldn't begin to read the Cantonese so had to stay mute.

This may well be the last Sunday we have to worship together in the Hall. I don't want to over spiritualise the boiler breakdown, but it might be like a seed dying and falling into the earth. We don't know if turning the seating around in the church will enhance our communal worship, but the PCC has agreed to try it out. I think it's fair to say that in doing so, most of us are unsure as to how we will feel about it and were very clear that we see it as an experiment, not a done deal. But I think it's worth remembering that when we come together for worship we do, to some extent, put our personal preference to one side. In the same way that the Benedictines have been experimenting with their liturgy for a mere fifteen hundred years and find shape in both repetition and change, I pray that we will find a shape to our worship that enhances our communal experience of God. That we will be able to listen to each other as we each, no doubt, experience a mix of emotions over the next few months.

I have found this prayer about moving beyond our emotions, and yet recognising the difficulty in knowing how to let go of ourselves in order to focus on Jesus and what form that focus might take, rather helpful:

O Lord, how do I let go when I am so unsure of things? I'm unsure of your will and I'm unsure of myself.....That isn't really the problem at all is it? The truth of the matter is that I hate the very idea of letting go. I really want to be in control. No, I *need* to be control. That's it, isn't it? I'm afraid to give up control, afraid of what might happen. Heal my fear Lord.

How good of you to reveal my blind spots even in the midst of my shambling attempts to pray. Thank you! But now, what do I do? How do I give up control? Jesus please teach me your way of relinquishment.

