

Reading: John 12:20-33

And Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it produces much fruit." (John 12:20-33)

We are always on the scrounge for a cheap holiday. One January school holidays I found that the vicarage in Granity on the West Coast was available. To stay for a week all you had to do was take the Sunday service. How difficult could that be? How many people would be coming to church in January in Granity anyway? As an afterthought the church warden said, "Oh and there is a group that uses the church on a Wednesday night." So off we went. The vicarage, as it turned out, was a part of the church. We had a lovely time playing on the beach and going to the local potteries. That was until Wednesday night. What they didn't tell us was that the group using the church was Alcoholics Anonymous and that the walls were very, very thin. As it turned out we could hear every word. As a group that had journeyed with each other for a long time there was a high degree of sharing. We had no TV, so we sat around as a family listening to their stories. It was better than Shortland Street. That was, until one man started sharing about his love life, then we thought it best to take our young daughters on a long walk. On returning we got our girls to sleep, and the men came through to the kitchen for supper. I really admired those men. One of them told me his story. He had got to rock bottom. His drinking had totally taken over his life. His family had left him, his boss had had to let him go, as they say, and all his money had gone. It was only when he had totally given his life over to God, that he had begun to see a change for the better. The first step in the Alcoholics Anonymous recovery programme begins like this "We admit we are powerless over alcohol – that our lives have become unmanageable. We believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand him."

In today's reading Jesus too is handing over his life totally to God. It's easy at this distance with 20/20 hindsight to think this was an easy thing for him to do. After all, we know it has a happy ending. But it was a struggle. It would have been so easy to avoid it and to choose instead the path to human glory. His disciples, some of whom were revolutionaries, really struggled. They believed the way forward was an armed rebellion to overthrow the Romans. So, Jesus uses a metaphor. It is a simple one - that a grain of wheat must fall into the earth and be buried, its external husk must be broken open for life to come out of it. Only if it dies will it bear much fruit.

The mathematics are amazing and you don't need to be Stephen Hawking to do the maths. If one seed produces forty times as much as itself, it would only take 6 years for that one seed to produce as many seeds as there are human beings on the planet. Jesus' path to glory will put him in the ground so he can bring fruit for God.

To follow Jesus is to give ourselves over to God. It is to die daily to sin and pride as the old prayer goes – in the big choices and the little.

One of the hardest things I ever did was resign my job at Housing New Zealand. I was a loans officer and had a really good friend at the desk opposite. We got talking one day. He loved paperwork and I loved meeting clients. So, he did all my paperwork, and I did all his interviews. When I told the manager I was going, he said to me, “What are you thinking? Going off to work for the church. The pay is poor, and you will never have a weekend ever again.” “Thanks for the encouragement, Brian,” I said, and handed in my resignation. It was a small dying to myself and I’ve never regretted it.

To die daily to sin and pride is in the making of small choices too. At church we might choose not to talk to our friends but the person on their own that we don’t know. In an argument we might choose not to say, “I told you so,” or we might choose not to take it to the nth degree to prove we are right. In talking with others, we might pause for breath in the sharing about ourselves to ask the other person how they are. Our culture tells us, it’s all about you, you deserve it whereas, paradoxically, the way to Life is to choose the best for another.

Today as we gather for harvest thanksgiving, we are celebrating the grains that have died to make bread, the seeds that died to themselves to produce flowers, the fruit that has died to itself to produce fruit. We also give thanks for the Bread of Life that Jesus died to himself in order that we might live.

Dying to our own egos is painful but it is a necessary step towards something lifegiving – freedom. Spiritual writers have used other metaphors to describe the process – being pruned is a common one. St Ignatius of Loyola talks of “disordered attachments” that keep us bound and enslaved.

But the final word is not about suffering. It is about the resurrection. The death of the seed leads to the marvel of the blade of wheat. The crucifixion leads to the marvel of new life.

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