

“... unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who despises his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life.”

Today's reading is taken from John, but these words are probably some of the most well-known of Jesus' teaching in all the gospels. But what did he mean by them? And what meaning does it have for us? The grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying to produce a rich crop, is about dying to a self-centred and selfish way of life, and opening up to a life of love and service. This has been called the 'death of the ego'. The ego is everything that says 'I, me and mine' instead of 'we, us and ours.' Sadly, this has been very clear of late in the shameful squabbling over vaccine supplies and a narrow-minded nationalism that has left poorer countries without even the beginning of a supply, or any immediate hope of it. An 'us and them' attitude is always direly misplaced in times of human suffering. If there were ever circumstances that cry out for 'we, us and ours', it is those we are presently living in. Sickness and death is the first great equalizer, ever pushing us towards a recognition of our common humanity.

We all need a strong and stable sense of self if we are to be psychologically healthy, a well-developed ego, a consistent self-identity – without this, the world would swallow us up. But Jesus is teaching us that this 'sense of self' – necessary though it is – should not be central, not the be-all-and-end-all of the person I take myself to be. It should be

a servant, not a master. When I believe that I am the captain of my own ship, that my life and my purposes are those alone that truly matter, when my world is bounded by 'I, me and mine', it is time for the grain of wheat to fall to the ground and die. The ego identifies itself by exclusion and fights tooth and nail to maintain that identity – even in the face of love. Love is glad when it is able to give something; the ego is glad when it is able to take something.

We can look at it in a simpler way: I am not a single, isolated unit, cut off from everything and everybody else – I am part of and contained in a greater and more glorious whole; no matter how I sometimes feel, I am never truly alone – nor can I ever be; life is not cold or cruel or uncaring – it is an infinite oneness in which all is held together – from the smallest blade of grass to the most distant galaxy – by the power of love; nothing and no one can truly die – because life is immortal and whatever exists is eternal. This is the vision we see when our grain of wheat has fallen to the ground and has pushed its way up through the dark earth into a radiant harvest.

What is the life that we must despise if we are to inherit eternal life? What did the Lord mean by this? Not the life of love and laughter, or children and grandchildren; not the changing of the seasons and the ebb and flow of the tide; nor meals shared with friends or the deep silence between those who have loved each other for many years; nor the colour and scent of flowers or the gentle shade of trees on warm

days; not the uplifting power of music or the response of the heart to great art. The Lord does not ask us to despise any of these things, because they are windows onto his kingdom through which we can glimpse heaven's light. God did not make human beings to hate anything that quickens the heart with love of him.

The life that we are urged to reject is that of the kingdoms and empires that have been imposed on the natural world and which have ravaged it to the point of destruction. In the gospel accounts of the Temptations of Jesus, Satan offer to give him all these kingdoms and empires if only he would kneel and worship him – and you can't give what you don't already own. In today's gospel Jesus refers to this when he speaks of 'the prince of this world.' In our day, the life of this world is that of political, economic and social injustice, oppression and ambition. It is vast multinational corporations which exploit poor nations for bigger profits; it is political ambition which persecutes and causes wars for greater power; it is the kingdoms and empires of our day where money is control, control is power, and when some people's wealth is too great to be reckoned while others lack the bare necessities of life. All this is what we must despise and reject – just as it despised and rejected Jesus – if we are to inherit eternal life.

Finally, the words of a modern mystic, a man who, through suffering and deep prayer, actually experienced

within himself the falling and dying of the grain of wheat that was his old self and his old life:

“A soft whisper of energy seemed to emerge from the stillness. It was like a tiny flame, one that could be easily overlooked but was eternally present. Like a moth drawn to light I followed it, until the idea of myself — of me, the individual person I thought of as me — began to melt away. No words can adequately describe this experience. I felt overwhelmingly whole, as if I was part of something that extended well beyond the conscious plane of existence. I went deeper and deeper... until I sensed the presence of the countenance of God.

“For the first time in my life I felt completely and unconditionally accepted. There was nothing that could break this bond. I didn’t need to ‘become’ anything or ‘prove’ my worth; I was already complete and whole. There was neither guilt nor shame. Any transgression was forgiven before I was even born. I was held as whole by a force that was greater than anything I had ever known. I cried, because I knew for the first time that I was unconditionally loved by God. Everyone, every living thing is unconditionally loved by God.”

That sounds a harvest well worth the grain of wheat falling and dying for.