



Sermon preached by Revd Paul Whittle on Sunday 21 March 2021

Readings: John 12.20-35; Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 5.5-10

Re-engaging with life in Scotland, as you can imagine, is already proving fascinating for me. For those who may not know, though born in Nottingham, I was mostly raised in the west of Scotland and both trained for the ministry and had my first church there. However, it is way back in 1983 that I left Scotland and moved to London – so I’ve been a long time away.

But though my move to Scotland is currently, though not for much longer, virtual, it is already re-kindling all sorts of memories. With apologies for repetition to the few who will have heard this, but most won’t – one of my key ecumenical colleagues in the new role is the Revd. Dr. George Whyte, the Principal Clerk to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Over fifty years ago, George and I, with names that are, of course, alphabetically close, sat alongside each other in the same registration class at Paisley Grammar School – and that renewed contact, after such a major gap, because we haven’t been in touch between whiles, reminded me of starting at Paisley Grammar. I was six months into secondary education. We had just moved from Greenock, and one of my lasting memories from my very early days there was the day I got lost coming home from school. We lived a couple of miles or so from the school and the first few days my Dad drove me and picked up, but then the big adventure – I was to walk home. I walked up from the school, past Paisley Abbey, and I got to Paisley Cross. Which way? There were four choices. I knew not to go back the way I had come, so that reduced it to three. Of course, I had been told very carefully which way to go. But I have never been good at remembering directions. That’s why I now so value sat nav technology. But I had to make a choice. Should I carry on straight. Or should I turn left, or right? I can’t remember whether I turned right, or carried straight on – but I didn’t turn left which is what I should have done – and so, eventually, I realised that I didn’t know where I was. I turned round, retraced my steps, found a phone box – remember those – and my Dad came and rescued me.

In slightly paraphrased words of the U2 song – I didn’t find what I was looking for.

It’s a small example, but the question of finding, or not, what we’re looking for, what we’re seeking, where we’re going, is a big one – in all sorts of ways.

In today’s Gospel we have a group of Greeks who were looking for Jesus. They came to Philip and said to him – *Sir, we wish to see Jesus*. We don’t know a great deal about these Greeks; but what we can say is that they seem to have good manners. Rather than rushing up and barging in, demanding an audience with Jesus, as some do in the pages of the Gospels, they rather approach Philip as an intermediary. Philip, in turn, seeks advice and support from Andrew, and the two of them then go to Jesus. So this little bit of the Gospel story begins with a measured approach and a careful observation of appropriate protocol.

But we are, of course, at a significant moment in the story. We won’t celebrate it until next week. But John has just given us his account of the events of what we now know as Palm Sunday. That means that, though “we” are still a week off, today’s Gospel is located in Holy

Week with all the tensions and overtones that must have been present during the last week of Jesus' earthly life. Today, is also often known as Passion Sunday, giving us a chance, which we also sometimes take on Palm Sunday, to include some Sunday thinking around the crucifixion and the events of Good Friday – as we otherwise leap straight from the hosannas of Palm Sunday to the Easter Day cry, 'He is risen!'

The approach of this Greek group to Jesus was somewhat tentative. We might assume that they had heard something of what Jesus was up to, which provided the basis for the request. Jesus has been engaging in some fairly amazing stuff. Water has been turned into wine. All sorts of healing has taken place. He has walked on water. He has even raised Lazarus from the dead. All sorts of people wanted to meet him. And Jesus responds to this approach with some fascinating, and challenging, words. Jesus takes the opportunity, once more, to try and communicate what his mission and ministry is all about. It's a Kairos moment. The hour has come, the hour in which he will be glorified. He wants the disciples to understand. But it is so complicated. It doesn't make sense. Except it does. Because Jesus uses the powerful example of the grain dropped into the earth which needs to die in order to bear fruit. We know that's so. But logically it doesn't make sense to bury something if you want to get something from it. Let me use another image. When I was learning to drive we lived in Bathgate. It was, in places, quite hilly and I remember the significant hill that was near to our house. The instructor told me to change gear, so I put the clutch in. But I couldn't quite believe that the car would continue going forward up this steep hill if I took my foot off the accelerator. So, I didn't – achieving, as you can imagine, a nice revving of the engine and making no contribution whatsoever to the car's continuing motion forwards.

The thing is that with God things don't take the path that we expect. We want to understand but we need to accept that there is stuff of God that is just beyond us. In a sense that is reflected in our passages from Jeremiah and Hebrews. Both indicate new possibility. That message is so central to our Christian faith and hope, and that is so relevant to the days in which we find ourselves.

Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant. It is a new covenant. There is a discontinuity with what has been. Yet, at one and the same time, there is a connection with God's unshakeable and unvarying grace. It's both. That's the paradox. That's the complicated bit. It's new and different. Verse 32 – *it will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors*. Yet it is also unchanging. God is God of what verses 35 and 36 call the *fixed order*.

Our passage from Hebrews picks this up as it reflects both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. It's one of a number of passages, of which the great hymn of Philippians 2 is perhaps the best known, in which the challenge, and the wonder, of Jesus being both divine and human is expressed.

But let's go back to John 12, and the words from Jesus that are reported in the gospel – *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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life*. And so on. And Jesus then goes on to talk about his death which, though unknown to the disciples, is now very close.

Jesus knows that he has a choice to make. He can save his life, or he can be a Saviour, but he cannot do both. The hour has come. It is not an easy hour, and that's an understatement. But it must be faced. It's challenging because of what it involves – but it is challenging also

because it takes us to a new view of suffering. A new way of looking at our options when suffering is one of our choices. Well, it's not a totally new view of suffering – but it is one that makes us think because it is not in line with our standard assumptions. There is a kind of view around that suffering is a punishment. We might even say something to the effect that if you do something you will have to “suffer” the consequences. Here's a different angle. Here is confirmation that, while there is no value in suffering just for suffering's sake, we no longer have to assume suffering to be a sign that God is annoyed with us, or that we've done something terribly wrong. That's the message that God tried to get through to Job's friends. It is also the message that Jesus tried to get through when he healed the man born blind, as recorded in John 9. But Jesus is saying more than that here. He is saying that suffering is not just something to be endured. Sometimes it is something to be embraced.

It's a tough message. I am not going to pretend that I totally understand it. But I know that intense suffering and God's love collide on the Cross. It is still hard to hear God's voice when he says these difficult things, just as it was for the disciples of old. We like it much better when it is all the positive stuff about growth and acquiring – and, happily, that's much of what God says to us. But there are choices to make. There are difficult decisions – and today's Gospel offers us an important reminder of these things as we move into the last couple of weeks of Lent. Good Friday is difficult, if we take it seriously – but we are in the fortunate position of not being able to eliminate from our minds the fact that Easter Day is then just round the corner.

In our context of pandemic, death is all around us. Many thousands globally have died from Covid 19. But, of course, it is not just the pandemic with which we need to deal. Hundreds of migrants have died making desperate and dangerous journeys. Many black lives have been lost under the scourge of racism, its injustice and inequalities. And climate change. Our planet is struggling with all that we are throwing at it. I'm very aware that the next big COP Conference on climate change, COP 26, will be in what will then be my home city of Glasgow at the beginning of November. Death is all around us, but dying is more than the physical, and, not least, the way to resurrection. As Rowan Williams once wrote: “God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation.”

As we, hopefully, slowly, emerge into a new normal, whatever that may mean, let's look for the shoots that indicate the coming fruit. Let's look for the new things in which God is calling us to engage. Of course, I am sure we will go back to lots of things we did. But I don't believe it's going to be the same. I don't believe we can, or should, emerge from this pandemic as though it had never happened. But I do believe that God will be with us in what will be.

So, let's share the prayer of the psalmist – *create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me*. And let's just wonder, and ask ourselves: what grain of wheat in our life needs to die so that some wonderful new fruit, Kingdom fruit, might get growing?