

5th Sunday of Lent (B) 2018
(Jeremiah 31:31-34 / John 12:20-30)
18.03.2018

We read poetic lines like those heard in today's gospel passage and we recite them in our turn, but I wonder if we really take the time to ponder their message; I wonder if we really think through what is said in passages like the one we read today and so come to grasp just what it means and all its implication for our lives.

The message Jesus speaks here and the implications for us are clear. In order to live in His risen life Jesus had to die. If we, with and like Jesus, are to share in His risen life, then, in our turn, we too must die.

Death is the obligatory passage towards true life: what John calls elsewhere in his gospel *abundance of life* – indeed, *fullness of life*.

Perhaps I could paraphrase in shorthand the message of today's gospel passage thus: *Jesus explained to His listeners: I must die so that I can bring new life to you. If you want to share in this new life, then you too must take the way I trace before you. You must also fall into the earth and die like a grain of wheat so as to be able to give new life – more life – all around you.*

Spoken poetically the message of the gospel is really beautiful. Lived concretely it is truly challenging. It is an excruciatingly painful process.

Jesus' message amounts to this: in order to move into life, in order to journey from captivity to freedom, brokenness to healing, guilt to forgiveness, isolation to intimacy – we must unequivocally accept to undergo sure and certain death. To truly live we must accept to undergo a really radical change that will inevitably involve pain and loss. To be fully alive human beings we must embrace the painful realities in our lives, allowing God to use these to make us whole. The new life in freedom to which we are called, as God's children and His chosen ones, is what I would call a *slow release process* and part of the way to our liberty in grace is to undergo a certain breakdown within ourselves. I'm inclined to believe that there can be no real breakthrough without a certain breakdown along the way.

Let's tease out what I am hinting at here by looking a little more closely at the image of the wheat grain which is employed by Jesus.

Maybe the best way to do that is actually to do what one person once did when she decided to try to make sense out of Jesus' words in today's gospel passage by deciding to go along and have a conversation with an abundantly alive wheat stalk.

Consulting the wheat stalk about its experience helped this person – and it can help us – to understand the process involved in spiritual growth. It can help us grasp and appreciate the spiritual itinerary required of us: Jesus' own itinerary which He tells us in this morning's gospel passage must also become ours, if we truly want to live.

Let's listen to a wheat stalk speak and hear what he might have to say to us. I think to begin with he would take us back to where all began: to that time when he was a single grain of wheat. I expect he might say something along these lines:

I liked being a grain of wheat. I was proud of who I was: golden, smooth, well formed, perfectly intact. But, then one day some farmer came along and He looked at me. He liked what He saw and He had even greater plans for me. He saw my potential for growth and greater development. I was delighted when he shared his vision with me. But, then, very quickly, all changed. I was thrown into confusion. Before I knew it, the farmer had taken things in hand in a way that really baffled me. He dug a hole and tossed me into it. I cried out: 'What's going on here? You've just thrown me into a hole.' My question was met by silence. The farmer looked as if he seemed to know what he was doing and he anticipated that this

should be enough to reassure me – and so he just stayed quiet. To be honest, at this point I understood nothing, but that wasn't the worst. The further things went on, the less I understood. You see, in that hole I found myself plunged into darkness. Dirt came pouring down upon me. I protested, 'Hey! You're burying me alive!' I cried out: 'Stop! Enough is enough!' But, the farmer didn't pay any heed and he still seemed to imply that he knew what he was doing. I still didn't understand! How could I? From where I was, I couldn't see a thing. It was still the great silence. I could neither see nor hear the farmer at this stage. As I sat in total darkness, afraid, a little hope came my way. I felt something that brought me some little relief. It was moisture. At first I thought: 'Good. I won't die of thirst down here.' But soon what I felt was more than just moisture which brought relief. I was quickly saturated. All became soggy. The environment into which I had been plunged began to have a terrible effect upon me. I sensed my golden colour was fading. My smooth exterior became wrinkly. My intactness was breached and I was split asunder. I just fell apart. I whimpered. I groaned with agonising pain. All I could say was this: 'I'm dying'... and die I did. It was the end of me as I had been hitherto.

Then something amazing happened. Out of my shrivelled, broken, dying self I felt new life emerge. It didn't feel like new life to begin with, mind you. It just felt like more pain to start with. Something broke in me, but as it did, so too did two shoots appear. Yes, two shoots emerged. One began pushing upwards, the other downward. The growth in depth was as important as the growth in height. Indeed, the exterior growth depended on the quality of the growth in depth. What went upward depended upon what went downward. The upward thrust needed the downward root in order to hold. These shoots were powered within me by a force which was, at one and the same time, within me and yet beyond me. With time, I came to understand that this was actually God's life emerging. As my root went down, my shoot went up until it broke through the soil and into the brightness of the sun. It was then, once I was no longer in the darkness, that it struck me what had happened to me. I had become transformed. I was no longer a grain of wheat – but something better: a stalk of wheat. From me would now come forth many, many grains of wheat that would help feed the people of the world.

So much for imaginative meditation (the sort engaged in by those who are inspired by Ignatian spirituality and scripture reading) and the rather quaint story of the wheat stalk which I've just recounted.

What we must grasp – and I'm sure many of you already have – not just from this story, but from your own life experience, is that we are called to trust in the Lord who is the farmer in the story. (There are many gospel stories which portray God as a farmer.) The Lord (the farmer) knows what He is doing with the grains of wheat which are us – even, and especially, when we don't fully understand what's going on in our lives.

Think of all the implications to what I'm saying. There are many. I can hear such calls as the call to befriend the darkness, to accept to be broken – to allow ourselves to be broken open... to understand the pains we endure in life as comparable to the pangs of childbirth (an image used more than once in biblical literature).

The message is clear. If we are to live we must embrace transformation – which comes about most often not without excruciatingly painful passages. We must learn to willingly relinquish what we esteem to be our intactness. We must become less in order to become more. We must believe that what seems like an end is in fact a beginning.

Even as we are plunged into deep darkness – as the grain under the surface of the earth, buried in the soil was plunged into darkness – we must believe all the more in the power of the light which is hidden from our eyes. Even when we don't see it, the light is working in our favour, attracting us out of the darkness, wanting to help us emerge from, to bring us above, the dark place wherein we find ourselves. As one poet puts it: *Shafts of light touch me*

– *Even in the darkness.* (I used this poet’s words on my late father’s memorial card.) For the same poet to go on to say: *New life is beginning. I reach out to embrace it. And am myself embraced.* Finally, for the poet to conclude what we will all be led to see one day – or rather to experience: *Death was the only entrance into this resurrection.*

Death is the only entrance into Christ’s resurrection!

The New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah in today’s first reading has been fulfilled in Christ – precisely, through His death and resurrection.

The call addressed to us is to enter into that mystery; it is to allow it to enter into our lives.

The call is, in the words of the Apostle Paul: *to die with Christ so that we may live with Him.*

Unless the grain of wheat dies it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest...

Anyone who loses his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.