

Title: Dying to Live

Preached by: The Revd Murray Wills

**Readings:** John 12:20-33

Preached St James' Anglican Church Lower Hutt

Services 8am and 10.30am

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May the words on my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you Lord my Rock and my Redeemer. **Amen**

Today we begin our journey to the cross. Next Sunday will be Palm Sunday and then of course Easter Sunday, the following week.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus focuses on the Cross and the giving of his life. He uses the metaphor of a grain of wheat, which appears to "die" when it is planted in the ground, but actually bears much fruit.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus," the Greeks say in our Gospel reading today to Philip. It's not an unusual request. The presence of the Greeks does though provide a helpful frame to the text, as at the end of the reading we're told that even as Jesus is lifted up (on the cross), Jesus will draw all people to himself. Perhaps this is John's hint that Jesus' mission includes not only the Jewish people but all people.

I wonder, however, if the visitors who came to Philip had any idea what they were asking. It seems a simple enough request, but Jesus' response is anything but simple. I don't know what answer Philip and Andrew expected but I'll bet they didn't expect to hear about death. It is probably not the answer we expect or want when we ask to see Jesus, but it is the answer Jesus gives.

*"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. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."*

Somehow death and seeing Jesus are intimately related. To see Jesus is more than looking at him. It is more than just believing the things he said and did. We follow Christ as participants not spectators.

By dying he, himself will bring forth much life and fruit. Jesus' focus is on all who will follow him.

If we want to see Jesus then we must learn to die. To the degree we avoid and deny death, we refuse to see Jesus.

Seeing Jesus means dying to all the parts of our life that bind us: fear; the need to be right or to be in control; anger and resentment; the guilt and disappointments of our past; attachment to power, wealth, and reputation; the ways in which we separate ourselves from one another; our obsessions, compulsions, and emotional agendas; the ways in which we hurt one another and damage relationships. Ultimately, it means dying to our own self-sufficiency. We let go of our life to receive God's life.

Let's not kid ourselves, this work of dying is difficult and painful. We all struggle with it every day, myself included. It is, as Jesus describes, soul troubling. It shakes us to the core. Dying, however, begins to clarify and heal our vision. We see a new life, and a new way of being. It looks like Jesus, and his way of living and being. That's what this week is about.

St. Francis of Assisi knew this law well when he wrote in his famous prayer for peace; "it is in giving that we receive; it is in dying that we are born again."

The Apostle Paul said: "We will not be united with Christ in a resurrection like his, unless we are first united with Christ in a death like his."

Holy Week is a time for learning how to die and death is the window through which we see Jesus. We must be careful, however, that we do not get stuck looking at the window rather than through the window. Dying is not the end, but a means, a way of transforming who we are.

William Barclay said ***“There are two great days in a person's life: the day we are born and the day we discover why.”***

We live in a selfish culture, a culture that glorifies the self. The reason kindness, goodness, charity is notable is because it is so rare. It isn't every day that you see people being nice, returning a \$100 note, a bystander helping someone who is being physically abused, or a good Samaritan that sacrifices their time and money to help someone in need. We don't see these things very often because we go about life in a hurry thinking only about ourselves.

We were created for a purpose. We are not meant to just sit back and do nothing until we get to heaven. We must do good, serve God, and participate somehow in winning souls to Jesus.

And as a servant of Christ, Jesus promises great riches – To the world that watches you, as you suffer and serve, putting yourselves last to put Jesus first, it doesn't seem like a wise thing to do. And if this world is all we had to live for, they would be right. But Jesus promises that those who serve him will be honoured.

True lasting honour, the highest honour, the greatest honour; it is the honour that comes from God.

Just like life comes in the place of death, so honour comes in the place of service.

Paediatrician David Cerqueira tells the story of a little girl in his wife's Sunday School class. His wife had prepared a lesson on being useful and told the children that everyone can be useful in serving God. There was a short moment of silence, and a little girl named Sarah spoke up. "Teacher, what can I do?" she said. "I don't know how do to many useful things."

Mrs. Cerqueira had not anticipated that kind of response, but she quickly looked around and spotted an empty flower vase on the windowsill. "Sarah," she said, "you can bring in a flower and put it in the vase. That would be a useful thing."

Sarah frowned. "But that's not important."

"It is," her teacher said, "if you are helping someone."

Sure enough, the next Sunday Sarah brought in a dandelion and placed it in the vase. In fact, she continued to do so each week. Without reminders or help, she made sure the vase was filled with a bright yellow flower, Sunday after Sunday. When her pastor found out about it, he put the vase in the main sanctuary next to the pulpit. That Sunday he gave a sermon on the honour of serving others, using Sarah's vase as an example. The congregation was touched by the message, and the week started on a good note...

But during that same week, Sarah's family discovered she had leukaemia. David Cerqueira was her paediatrician, and he did his best to explain to Sarah's parents that nothing could be done to save her life. He says, "I don't think I have ever had a more difficult conversation than the one that night."

Eventually, Sarah became confined to bed and to the visits that many people gave her. She lost her smile. She lost most of her weight; and then, the end was near.

That Sunday, at the end of his sermon, the pastor suddenly stopped speaking. His eyes wide, he stared at the back of the church, and everyone turned to see what he was looking at. It was Sarah! Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket, a dandelion in one little hand.

She slowly walked to the front of the church where her vase was still perched by the pulpit. She put her flower in the vase and a piece of paper beside it. Then she returned to her parents.

Four days later, Sarah died... At the funeral, the pastor showed Dr. Cerqueira the note Sarah had left. It said, "Dear God, This vase has been the biggest honour of my life. Sarah."<sup>1</sup>

In her own small way Sarah showed that we all can be useful in serving God.

We often say we want a relationship with Jesus. But it sometimes seems as if we want to have that relationship on our own terms:

- I want you to be my saviour;
- if you do this, I want you to be my Lord;
- if you will do that, I will give you my love and devotion;

- The purpose of my life is my self-fulfilment. Life is preoccupied with me and my happiness;
- I am preoccupied with myself, my successes, my failures, and what other people are thinking about me.

Those that want to live the selfish life ask "what about me?" Those that want to live the selfless life ask "what about them?"

So what about you?

Let's take a minute to reflect on what we need to let go of to follow Jesus as his disciples?

So, let's recap. As we reach this point in our journey towards Holy Week, let us remind ourselves that we are called to be disciples who follow Jesus. We draw near during Holy Week to reflect on Jesus' message and what it means for us. This is a time of us continuing to learn how to die to ourselves. Dying to all the parts of our life that bind us and prevent us from living the life that Jesus has demonstrated to us and asked us to live. It is through dying to these things that we will live. It is through dying that we will receive eternal life.

**Amen**

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<sup>1</sup> (David Cerqueira, "Sarah's Vase," Today's Christian, March/April 2008, adapted from Evangel magazine, December 2005. From a sermon by C. Philip Green, We Want To See Jesus, 4/14/2011)

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## Newslink

In our Gospel reading today Jesus focuses on the Cross and the giving of his life. He uses the metaphor of a grain of wheat, which appears to “die” when it is planted in the ground, but actually bears much fruit. By dying he himself will bring forth much life and fruit. Jesus’ focus is on all who will follow him. Disciples follow Jesus and do what he does. Truly “seeing Jesus” as his disciples involves dying to all the parts of our life that blind us: fear; the need to be right or to be in control; anger and resentment; the guilt and disappointments of our past; attachment to power, wealth, and reputation; the ways in which we separate ourselves from one another; our emotional agendas; the ways in which we hurt one another and damage relationships. Ultimately, it means dying to our own self-sufficiency. We let go of our life to receive God’s life. As we draw near to Holy Week, let’s reflect on Jesus’ vision, seeking to understand what it means for us. Holy Week is a time for learning how to die, and death is the window through which we see Jesus. We must be careful, however, that we do not get stuck looking at the

window rather than through the window. Dying is not the end, but a means, a way of transforming who we are. MW

**Theme:** The hour has come Sentence: Jesus said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” John 12:32

**Collect:** Lord Jesus Christ, you were lifted up on the cross for us and for our salvation; help us to triumph over evil and to do good, to give ourselves to you as you give yourself for us, and to live and work to your praise and glory. **Amen**