

**Sunday 1st May 2022 Evensong
Easter 3 (C)**

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 40:27-31

NT: John 12: 20-26

Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

“I tell you, 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”.

In the heart of Rome, a few steps north of Trajan's column and the 'wedding cake' monument to the first king of a united Italy, Victor Emmanuel II, you come to the church of Santi Apostoli, the Holy Apostles, a fifth or sixth century church now cared for by the Conventual Franciscans that was in origin a shrine church to just two of the Twelve, Philip and James, whose remains were buried here. It was the dedication day (May 1) of this church that has given us today's feast. the feast of Saint Philip and Saint James, apostles with ambiguous storylines and confusingly common names. We celebrate them on a combined feast day because, even though they died at different times and in different locations, their bodies were moved and are buried together in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Rome.

But what do we know of these two apostles, Philip, and James?

Philip appears in several important moments of Jesus' ministry mostly recorded in the gospel of John. Jesus calls Philip to follow him shortly after calling Andrew and Peter, and Philip responds by telling his friend Nathanael. Philip convinces Nathanael to 'come and see' Jesus even though the skeptical Nathanael isn't sure anything good can come out of Nazareth.

In John's account of feeding the crowd of 5,000, Jesus asks Philip, 'how are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' And Philip's practical response about a monetary value sets the table for the feeding of the multitude with the bread and fish. A few chapters later, we find these evenings reading Philip converses with 'some Greeks' who want to see Jesus and then at the last supper Philip asks to see the Father in order to be satisfied.

Philip the Apostle is easy to confuse with Philip the Evangelist, who is one of the seven appointed as deacons in Acts 6, and who teaches the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus a few chapters later.

Today is not only about Saint Philip though, we must also remember Saint James, often called James the Less. This name helps distinguish him from James the brother of John, who together are known as the sons of Zebedee, and from James 'the brother of our Lord.' Little is known about the James whom we celebrate today. He is called the son of Alphaeus, and he might have been with his mother (another Mary!) and the other women watching the crucifixion from a distance.

The character, identity, and intrigue of these two apostles are rooted in their relationship to Jesus. They are counted among the twelve which means they are participants in all the stories about Jesus' teaching, healing, and his resurrection appearances we read about in the gospels.

In this evenings New Testament reading, Philip is centre stage, the questioning Greeks had come at Christ's entry into Jerusalem, asking to see Jesus. From this encounter we not only learn that there were Greeks who were Jews in Jerusalem but that Philip himself was a Greek from Galilee. I can only imagine they must have heard the amazing miracles Jesus had been performing. This was a man who turned water into wine, healed all manner of sickness, walked on water, and even raised Lazarus from the dead. Who would not want to have an encounter with this Jesus?

The dialogue that Jesus has with the Greeks who seek him out (John 12, 23-26) brings Jesus to the memorable pronouncement that 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit'.

The human experience is a cycle of loss and renewal. The Christian journey consists of repentance and restoration. Life is both gift and burden.

In the post pandemic landscape in which we find ourselves, death is all around us. Millions globally have died from Covid-19. Thousands have died so far in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and there is no clear end in sight to the death and destruction. The natural world is dying at the hands of human behaviour.

Death is all around us but dying is more than the physical.

Throughout our lives, we die many times over through a whole range of losses – the death of a loved one, the end of a dream, the breakdown in a relationship, the deterioration of a person's health, and navigating the stages of life. Through all these losses we experience so many emotions: anger, regret, guilt, despair, unforgiveness and fear.

Jesus calls us to be a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies. Because it is in the dying that we have the potential to bear much fruit. It is in the total surrender and dying that new life can emerge. Rowan Williams reminds us, 'God always has the capacity to do something fresh and different, to bring something new out of a situation' (2007, 16).

Despite the brokenness of our world, there is hope that our churches and communities can be re-imagined through the lens of God's generous love. Scripture reminds us again and again of the God-centred paradigm of sacrificial and radical hospitality which embraces the dead and the dying. God's love has the power to heal, resurrect and enable human flourishing.

Jesus' relationships underscored unconditional love and acceptance with those on the margins. Therefore, the truth of the gospel message is that God is found in vulnerability: in the grain of wheat. His presence is revealed, and people encounter Christ when we take up the invitation to create communities where all people know a God-centred acceptance and belonging in his kingdom-family.

So, the challenge for all of us is to open ourselves to the process of dying – as Jesus himself did on the journey to the cross – and invite God as the psalmist does in Psalm 51 to 'create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.'

What grain of wheat in your life needs to die to enable you to reimagine generous hospitality to those in our society who are dying under the weight of injustice? Perhaps it is as we let go and see God in those dead places that we have the potential to bear much fruit for the kingdom.

Fr Bill Addy