

unless a grain of wheat...

a sermon preached on the
5th Sunday in Lent

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 119:9-16, Hebrews 5:5-14, John 12:20-33

The lectionary gives us this gospel text on the fifth Sunday in Lent, I assume for good reason. We are being prepared today for something with this text: "Very truly, 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."¹ It should be clear from this that we are being prepared – just as John the Evangelist's community was being prepared, just as Jesus was preparing his disciples – to undergo a ritual of initiation. This is the answer to the question: "we wish to see Jesus".² So Lent's forty days are a preparation to undergo a ritual of initiation: to 'see Jesus' by becoming the grain of wheat which must fall into the ground and die.

For the Christian community *the* ritual of initiation is the sacred Easter Triduum – one liturgy, which requires three days of undergoing.

It is almost certainly the case that the church's earliest practices were a Christianised reinterpretation of ancient initiation rituals – about which we now know a great deal thanks to anthropologists, ethnologists, historians and archaeologists. Common to all initiation rituals is the spiritual insight that a person only comes to true knowledge of a spiritual truth by experience. Spiritual truth does not consist in going to classes and readings books – not even reading sacred Scriptures. God's law is dangerous in the head, Jesus repeatedly declares to the religious leaders: it must be written, rather, in the heart.³ Those who merely read the words and think about them know only part – and are prone to becoming distorted legalists, rather too much 'lovers of their life', who will therefore lose it. But the person who wants to 'see Jesus' only sees, in fact, by undergoing something – by undergoing the ritual initiation which they do not invent for themselves, which requires the 'hating' of life that leads to keeping it.⁴

If you and I wish to 'see Jesus', this is what's necessary: falling into the ground and dying. For although Christ was a 'Son', he learned obedience through what he suffered.⁵ The sacred Easter Triduum is the church's communal action in which we ritually fall into the ground and die – and thus bear much fruit, 'resurrection' being this fruit's technical name.

The Easter Triduum is an 'initiation' rite precisely because it's not what the participant chooses. And it qualifies as an initiation rite precisely because in the experience of undergoing it the participant actually experiences some kind of dying. We would say in modern psychological parlance that the participant experiences the death of some aspect of the ego. The ego which so wants to be in charge, to take control, to have its own way – it must fall into the ground and die. Because if it does not, it remains a single grain: that is, alone, separate from God, and ultimately from the whole of God's creation.

Should that word 'ego' troubles you, and you think this is just a modern concept, then reflect upon St Paul's teaching: "No longer I (**egw** *egō*) who live, but Christ who lives in me".⁶ Paul understood that the "I" must give die so that the Christ may live in us.

¹ John 12:24
² John 12:21
³ Jeremiah 31:33
⁴ John 12:25
⁵ Hebrews 6:8
⁶ Galatians 2:20

The Easter Triduum is the wisdom the early church intuited and developed – over the course of a few centuries. Like all initiation rituals, ancient and modern, the Easter Triduum exposes the willing participant to the experience of transformation – the experience of dying and rising. Like all initiation rituals, the Easter Triduum’s outer predictability – we all know ‘the plot’ – is merely the vehicle by which the participant undergoes a dying and rising which is utterly unique and particular, the outcome of which cannot be predicted. This is so important it’s worth saying it again, slightly differently. Though we all know the plot of Jesus’ life, and though we all know the ‘narrative’ of the Triduum’s ritual action, what distinguishes mere re-enactment from initiation is that in the case of the latter, the participant experiences an actual inner death and transformation.

So this is how Lent Five’s gospel in Year B, the ‘Year of Mark’, is preparing us for the rigour and demand of what is almost at hand. Each of us will come to this year’s Triduum with some particular aspect of the ego’s demand for control that must die. For each of us there is a unique inner death required – for the sake of our own transformation. On Lent Five we are being invited to both commit ourselves to undergo the Triduum ritual initiation – to take it seriously by undergoing its entire process and not treating its three parts as ‘options’ – and to honestly name before God that which we have begun to sense must fall into the ground and die.

This will be our true offering which will be broken open on the evening of Holy Thursday, which will die and be buried on Good Friday, lying in the appalling silent abyss of Holy Saturday, and which will bear unexpected fruit in the first light of Easter Day.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au