

21 March 2021

Writings: Seeds

Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain" (John 12:24).

When I was growing up, I would plant a vegetable garden every spring in our backyard. After digging up the dirt, I would get out the packages of seeds and look at them before I placed them into soil. I would marvel at how this small hard and dull coloured object would soon be a large and colourful carrot, radish or green-bean plant. I had no knowledge of all the biochemical reactions and biological processes which had to take place for that transformation to occur. All I knew was that a seed could never reach its potential (to become a plant) unless it stopped being a seed which happened when I planted it in the earth.

In today's Gospel, Jesus uses the image of a seed dying (germinating) as a way to explain how his upcoming death will complete his mission on earth, glorify his Father and be a way for his disciples to understand the relationship between life in this world and the next.

The individuals who approached Jesus were likely Greek speaking Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. They were probably familiar with a Greek idea that death was the permanent separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. Many Jews believed that after death the soul entered a land of shadows (Sheol). Pharisees taught at the end of time there would be a Resurrection of the Dead while the Sadducees rejected this belief. Although we do not know what these individuals thought about death, they were likely intrigued by what Christ taught. One's accomplishments were identified with what one did during one's life not in one's death. A heroic death (like one during the Maccabean War against the Greeks) certainly brought glory to the deceased and proved one's fidelity to God but how would it glorify the all-powerful God? Although a final judgment of the righteous and unrighteous was expected by some before the Resurrection of the Dead, how was one's death an explanation for the relationship between life in this world and the next? Clearly, what Jesus taught about death contrasted sharply with many existing ideas about it.

This difference was rooted in the fundamental elements of God's plan for the salvation of humanity. Although during his life Jesus achieved much through his teachings and miracles, his mission was to redeem humanity from the bonds of sin and enable it to experience an everlasting experience of God (eternal life). This could only be accomplished through his death on the cross. His Passion and Death glorified God because it proved Divine Love was a more powerful force than any evil humans could experience on earth (betrayal, denial, injustice, mockery, physical suffering). The Resurrection which followed these events demonstrated the reality of life after death and once they were understood by the disciples meant they no longer fear evil and death and drove them to share this news with others.

During the Covid 19 Pandemic, many people have spent a lot more time thinking about death. Although most of those who have died from the virus were older people, the spread of the variants has meant deaths among young people have increased. Spouses, children, grandchildren and friends have had their lives fundamentally changed by the death of a Covid 19 patient. The virus has reminded everyone of their vulnerability.

People of faith understand life is a precious gift from God. We should do everything in our power to stop the spread of the virus and the deaths which follow in its wake. Yet, disciples of Jesus also understand life in this world is not all there is for humans to consider. Christ's teachings should temper our fears and anxieties about death. One day we will have to face our own death. It might be during this pandemic. It is unlikely we will understand why it must occur that day and in that particular way. We will not know for certain exactly what will happen the moment after we die. What we do know is that like a seed which stops being what it is to become what is meant to be, we will do the same. Jesus died and rose from the dead to show us that is God's plan and we have nothing to fear.

My understanding of how seeds turn into plants remains quite limited. So does my understanding of the relationship between life in this world and the next. As I have gotten older, I have become more comfortable with such mysteries.