

5th Sunday of Lent (B)
(Jeremiah 31:31-34 / John 12:20-30)
22.03.2015

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

These gospel words show us that there can be no life without the experience of a certain death. To dream of journeying through life without ever having to submit to the reality of successive deaths in our existence is to be living a pure illusion.

In the same way, we cannot fully welcome what is new in our lives without daring to let go off what is old. To let go off our old ways is not easy. We find it hard to discard them.

In all our lives there can be things of the past and/or things of the present that we cling to *like grim death*, as popular speech puts it.

We cause ourselves a lot of the ill in life by our reluctance to let go off things we would be better to let fall.

So much of the sad lifelessness we drag around on our weighed down shoulders could and should be set aside.

For our well-being, for our joy, there are things we must have the wisdom and the courage to discard at a certain moment.

How much *no longer fit for purpose* rubbish we can accumulate in our lives!

In the light of God's word addressed to us this morning I have a proposal to make.

I propose that we dare to look at our lives in a very concrete way to discern just what it is we might be being called to let go off at this time in order to come into new life in Christ, a renewed life in accord with God's will for us.

To look at our lives in this way challenges us.

It obliges us to face up to the fact that there are surely things in all our lives that we are called to die to.

The thought of death can frighten us, even when it heralds new life beyond death.

The dark passage through death, that passage into the unknown, holds many of us back from experiencing the new life, beyond all imagining, the Lord has prepared for us and so ardently longs to see us enjoy.

How readily we live out of an attitude that dictates *better the devil we know!*

The devil we know is not better than the God of life who bids us to enter into a certain unknown!

My choice of words there is made consciously.
The unknown into which God calls us is certain!

It is surely and certainly good that awaits us.

The Lord of life and love wants only what is good for us. He desires for us only what is for our

well-being, what will make us live truly, fully, to our greatest possible potential.

It is the assurance that our God is good and His desire for us is benevolent that gives us the courage we need to face up to these real questions with which I suggest we dare to confront ourselves:

What particular death it is that is being asked of me right now?

What is it that I must dare to let go off so that I may live my life better and freer than at present?

What has to be crucified in me so that I may live my life risen with Christ?

We are more inclined to dodge and try to avoid such questions than courageously face up to them.

Why?

Well, as I have said, death frightens us.

Every kind of loss makes us fearful.

It is our fears that have us shy away from facing up to the challenges presented to us, but more than that, these fears actually hold us bound; they hinder us from entering into and enjoying the freedom for which we long.

If we look at our lives in all honesty and truth, do we not see that so much of what we cling to (so many of our unhealthy attitudes, addictive behaviours, compulsive acting out etc.) is all stuff we resort to in a bid calm our anxieties, our feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness and even complete worthlessness?

If we look at things in a more level-headed way, are we not led to recognise that the unhealthy behaviours we resort to, do not, in fact, hold ill at bay. While they may momentarily bolster within us a false sense of security, or, at least, provide a distraction, they resolve nothing. Ultimately, they only do us more damage.

The more we resort to unhealthy behaviours, the more insecure and inadequate we are likely to feel, the more stressed and anxious we are likely to become, the more inhibited, enfeebled, paralysed and lifeless we are going to leave ourselves.

I think if we dare to look at our lives in all honesty and truth we will see this to be true.

Let's face it:

How many of us are living our lives to our full potential?

Are any of us really doing that?

Understand me.

I am not advocating here that we espouse an attitude of drivenness. (We can become as addicted to that subtle unhealthy attitude as more evidently unhealthy behaviours.)

I am not for one minute suggesting that we push ourselves more.

To the contrary.

What I am advocating is that we dispose ourselves more to the action of God's grace at work within us.

What I am suggesting is that we leave the Lord the freedom He needs to be able to work in our lives by the action of His grace to bring about the transformation, the new thing for which we so ardently long, but which we struggle such a lot to welcome.

I wonder what it is that frightens us most at the end of the day.

Is it the deaths required of us or is it not more than that?

I wonder if it is not the fact that we know that an arduous process accompanies the emergence of all new life.

We know pain to be part of every birthing process.

We can be afraid of that pain and so take refuge in staying comfortably stuck where we are.

When this is what we opt for, then we are settling for something less than life: we are contenting ourselves with survival.

What we are called to is life!

Further on in John's gospel we find these words spoken by Jesus: *I live, you also shall live.*

If these words are to be realised in our lives, we must follow the path to life Jesus took.

This path entailed His passage through death.

A poetic line I included on my own late father's memorial card speaks strongly to me in this respect. I share it with you this morning: *Death was the only entry into this resurrection.*

The poet has those words spoken by one who has died with Christ.

For me they are applicable not only to one who has died physically. They are equally applicable to all of us.

I wonder can we make them our own.

We must have the courage to die to what is no longer alive in us, so that we may live our lives to the full with and in Christ, in freedom of heart, as God calls us to.

The words *I live, you also shall live* make it clear that true life is found with and in Christ.

God's love communicated to us by Christ-Jesus brings real security into our lives.

Our experience of God's love leads us to be able to trust enough to let go of all the false securities we put in place to protect and shield ourselves.

Our insecurities, which we are inclined to tend to unhealthily by resorting to false securities, only feed our dependencies.

Love, however, sets us free from all that holds us bound in an oppressive dependency.

When we look at many of our coping mechanisms, are we not led to see that they actually do us more harm than good?

The ways we deal with stress and anxiety, grief and loss, are quite often far from satisfactory. They fail to fill the void we feel. In fact, they dig the hole in our soul even deeper.

We long for peace of mind and heart and we aspire to happiness.

The way to attain what we long for is found in trust: daring to trust Jesus enough to die with Him in order to pass over to live in Him.

Again, I stress, I am not talking of physical death at the end of our earthly existence. I am talking of the multiple daily passages through deep shadow which are asked of us as we journey into the light of Christ.

The way to peace of mind and heart, to happiness, to fullness of life, is found by walking in the way Jesus has traced before us. It is found in daring to believe that He walks with us in what we are led to traverse in our lives day by day, with the twists and turns that are part of the journey, the ups and downs that are part of our pilgrim's progress.

The meaningful life that God wants for us is to be found in welcoming our existence as it is, allowing the Lord to make His presence felt in our lives, as they are, in a way that leads us to become more fully the persons He would have us become.

The meaningful life God wants for us is found by our recognition of the fact that the Lord walks with us as we struggle with our problems.

Walking through life with the Lord does not make us bypass reality. It does not lead us to avoid life's challenges.

The way the Lord walks with us leads us to traverse the suffering that is part of every person's story; it leads us through death to life.

We find this difficult to accept.

We would like to live without having to die.

This message that death is part of the process of life is not what we would like to hear.

We want the gain, but not the pain.

Jesus' message is unequivocal. We must accept to pass through the valley of death in our lives. We must discard much of what we are more inclined to cling to as we pass through that way.

If we are to know life we must be courageous enough to embrace all the strong challenges that are part of Jesus' invitation to follow Him.

We must dare to take the way He followed right to the end.

This will mean setting aside the many forms of escapism we put in place in our lives.

The call addressed to us by Jesus this morning seeks to lead us to fullness of life in well-being. It seeks to lead us beyond our addictions to freedom, our brokenness to healing, our stress and anxiety to peace of mind and heart, our sentiments of guilt and feelings of inadequacy to a sense of being forgiven and pleasing to God.

At the heart of Jesus' message is the reminder that we are obliged to pass through death to life. The passage through death (with the loneliness and isolation inherent to this passage) is the only way for us to enter into the blessed communion, the joyful fellowship, life in the family of God, to which Jesus beckons us

Amen!