

Sunday Homily

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

21 MARCH 2021

YEAR B

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain.”

John 12:24

Illustration

There’s a poem by George Mackay Brown called *Elegy*. Its name suggests that it is a poem of mourning for death, but it is actually a poem about how life and death are inextricably intertwined. The poet speaks of the harvest crops as “risers from the dead”, calling out “ripeness and resurrection.”

Brown lived almost all his life in Orkney, a group of islands off the north coast of Scotland. It’s a place where you cannot avoid nature. The darkness of the winter, and the long days of summer when it never grows dark; the seasonal comings and goings of the fish, the sand eels and the birds; the animals who are born, grow, and become the renowned Orkney beef; the crops sown, watered by the soft rain, buffeted by the winds, ripened by the warm sun, and finally harvested; the County Show, when the whole community gathers to celebrate another year of agriculture. Brown knew what city dwellers can sometimes forget: that we human beings belong to nature too. We are born, grow, live and die, like everything else on the earth.

Brown was also a Christian, and for him the turn of the seasons spoke not only of decay but of resurrection. The world turns, and there is death and new life.

On the whole, this is something we prefer not to remember. Our culture spends a lot of time and effort denying and delaying death. Medicine is there to mend the ills of old age; cosmetics reduce the signs of ageing. We pretend we are immortal. But the reality is, we die.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus had no time for sentimental notions about human life. He knew all its reality. According to the Gospel writers, he was aware that his own life would be cut short. The stance he took, the things he did, the people he consorted with, his outspoken attacks on religious and political authorities alike, all these things combined to make it certain that he would not be allowed to live to a ripe old age. In John’s Gospel in particular, we find him trying to break through his disciples’ denial and misunderstanding, and prepare them for his death and what it would mean.

Like George Mackay Brown, Jesus and his disciples lived close to nature. Some were farmers, some fishermen by trade. They knew the cycles of nature, and human powerlessness in the face of nature's insistence. So Jesus turns to nature for a metaphor to try to help them understand. He speaks of a single grain. Held in the hand, it is useless. It needs to be put into the ground, where it breaks down as if it is dead. From that death, life grows, a plant with many grains that can be used for food. This is what his death is about, Jesus suggests. His effect on the world will be minimal while he is alive. But from his death will come enough new life for all the world. That is why he will not try to avoid his death. He knows that true life, for him and for those who come after him, only comes on the other side of death.

Application

Jesus is not just speaking of himself. He talks too about his followers needing to be ready to lose their lives in order to gain life. Being afraid of death, trying to delay it at all costs, trying to defeat the signs of ageing, all these things preoccupy people. The obsession with preserving our lives as they are prevents us from attending to the kind of life that really matters, life that is full and generous and truthful.

We, understandably, mostly want to take the road of avoidance, to forget about death until we can no longer ignore it, to cling on to youth and beauty and hope that cures will be found for everything that might kill us. It's hard to face up to death, both our own and that of those we love, and our society does not help us. We live with a nagging fear, buried deep inside us, which we push away rather than face up to. But facing up to it, Jesus suggests, is the way to real life, in which we know our limitations and can be honest about them, and not be afraid to take risks for the sake of love and truth. The result, according to our Gospel reading, is worth it. The result is eternal life, beginning now.