

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

When Douglas Adams wrote his book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, he added a central joke which was the answer to the question 'what is the meaning of life, the universe and everything?' For Adams aficionados you will know that the answer in the book is 42. The question and its answer, probably being more famous than the book itself.

Our Gospel reading (John 12: 20 – 33) seeks to articulate the answer to that question for all of us. Jesus tells us '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'. (John 12:24).

It is a truth and a reality that we sometimes find difficult to face. But it is the pattern of loss and renewal that runs through our lives and through the world. Parts of our lives die so that other parts of our being can live and thrive. When we fall in love, parts of our single life have to die so that we can commit ourselves to our significant other. When we become parents there are many sacrifices that are made so that children can flourish and grow. If we have been carers, then there are often parts of life that we have to give up, so that the other can live in dignity and love. Then there are the sacrifices that we make to pursue an education or a career. So many things that we have to let die so that new things can flourish. We see the same pattern in the glory of creation. The spring flowers that we are enjoying at the moment from the corms and bulbs of the ones that died in the autumn. The mulch of dead leaves that gives food and shelter to bugs and insects. Death that brings life.

It is a pattern of loss and renewal that threads through the history of the people of God. Consciousness in humanity only came through the loss of innocence in the garden of Eden. Abram and Sarai left their home and family so that they could become Abraham and Sarah, the parents of many nations. Jacob who lost his old identity to become Israel. Simon and Andrew, James and John who left their lives as fishermen to follow Jesus and of course Jesus himself, whose life death and resurrection brings us all life and a new relationship with the God of love. It is the answer to the question of life that we declare every week when we celebrate Holy Communion: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Our Gospel reading takes place in the context of this pattern of loss and renewal; the feast of the Passover. When the people of God remembered the death of their old life in slavery in Egypt and celebrated their new life in the promised land. In the cosmopolitan environment of Jerusalem during the festival, some Greeks come to Philip asking to see Jesus. They come to Philip, possibly because of his Greek name. He may have spoken Greek and might even have been known to the Greek pilgrims in Jerusalem. John doesn't tell us exactly why the Greeks wanted to see Jesus. Perhaps they had heard about his teaching or had heard about the miracles that he had performed. Maybe they were already known to Philip and wanted to know why Philip had given up his life and followed an itinerant preacher from

Nazareth. Whatever their motivation, Philip tells Andrew about them and together they tell Jesus about the request. Jesus responds; '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'

Jesus' response to the request may seem strange. But to see Jesus, to really see him, the Greeks (and us too) have to identify those things that will hinder us seeing him. We need to die to, or give up our reliance on, the worldly way of doing things. Our self-reliance, our fears, our anger, our disappointment, our guilt – all those things that we sometimes cling to, but are the things that stop us living life in all its fullness. The life that Jesus came to offer. If we want to really see Jesus we have to accept that we will be changed by the experience. We too, have to be like that grain of wheat and die to our old lives. To let go of the things that hold us back from a real and living relationship with God. The things that if they die will make space for new life, in all its fullness, that Jesus offers each and every one of us.

There are times in our lives when we have painful experiences. But sometimes those painful experiences are the times when we learn the most about ourselves, our relationships and our lives. In hindsight, which is of course always 20/20 vision, we can see the times in our lives, when we too have been through that process of death that brings forth life. The beauty that comes from ashes. It is very often in those circumstances when we see the action of God in our lives or have felt the presence of Jesus alongside us, as we worked through difficult or painful situations.

'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.'

This pattern of loss and renewal is at the heart of what makes us human. But it also creates space in which the transformational love of God, expressed in Jesus Christ, can work. If we allow God into our lives, every part of our lives, then we too can be transformed from living lives of insular, self-reliance into fruitful lives that are lived in fullness. Lives that reflect the glory of God. Lives that transform our families and our communities. Lives that ultimately help to bring about the kingdom of God here on earth.

As we approach Passiontide, as we walk the way of the cross with Jesus, we immerse ourselves in his story of life, death and renewal. The pain of Good Friday becomes the joy of the empty tomb. The renewal of life itself. The dawn of a new relationship between humanity and God through the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The single grain of wheat that becomes the Bread of Life.

Jesus tells us the answer to 'life, the universe and everything'. The answer isn't 42. It is the difficult truth that we have to die to our self if we want to follow Jesus. But the great good news is that if we do take that step, then Jesus' promise of life in all its fullness will be ours. Amen