

22 March 2015

Many years ago when I was in the seminary, I attended the ordination of a priest in country Victoria. It was a learning experience for me as a city boy to see some of the difficult and challenging conditions of country priests and their people who worked the land. This priest in particular celebrated his ordination in a part of Victoria that grew wheat but which at that time was in the middle of a crippling drought. He chose today's Gospel passage in order to stand in solidarity with his people on the land who were suffering so much. There had been no rain for years. They kept planting seed and tilling the soil with little or no result. You could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium as the newly ordained priest asked everyone present to pray for rain, that the soil would be nurtured and that the gift of rain would bring an abundant harvest for the whole district.

For those of us who do not come from, or do not live, an agricultural life we all understand the significance of today's Gospel passage. Seed sown in rock or on concrete does not give you an abundant harvest. Seed planted in sand or in a drought does not give you an abundant harvest. But seed planted in rich, moist, fertile soil dies unto itself in order to bring forth new life. In this Lenten season, we know that Jesus is that seed. He dies unto himself in order to bring forth life. He forsakes his life on the cross, Jesus gives his life for a new and higher purpose and his death, just like the dying of a seed brings forth a new and more abundant life. It brings forth the life of faith.

And as disciples of Jesus, we hear this Gospel passage and are called to imitate the Master. We too are called to 'die to self', to forsake our lives, to give of ourselves for the higher and noble cause of the Gospel. Lent is not about punishing ourselves and going without something in order to be miserable. Pope Francis reminds us that there is no place in the Church for miserable people! But dying to self brings us the joy of faith and freedom. Freed from selfish desires and the power of our own ego, the call of faith is really the call to freedom. That's why we had the reading last Sunday about the chosen people of God freed from the slavery of Egypt; a gentle reminder about the God who sets them free only for them to be enslaved again by worshipping the golden calf. In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks strongly about dying to self and giving

one's life in the service of others, preserving the gift of faith for the honour of God, yielding a rich harvest for all the world to see. Only the disciple who is truly free can respond with fidelity and love to this call of the Lord.

In today's first reading, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of God writing his law deep within our hearts. Jesus comes not just to impart religious doctrine; Jesus comes to change our hearts and lives, to set us free from slavery and sin and bring us into the light, hope and joy of his resurrection. Religion is not meant to make our lives miserable; religion is meant to fill our lives with joy. But for that joy to be authentic, there is a cost that comes from living the Christian life of faith. And Jesus gives us an indication of this in today's Gospel; the whole Easter season is about celebrating Jesus giving his life to set us free.

The call to 'die to self' hit me during the week. One email I received was from my favourite menswear chain inviting me to buy shirts, trousers and pullovers for 25% off. I have enough of these garments and didn't need anymore. The second email was from Caritas Australia inviting people to donate to the appeal for the people of Vanuatu. Naturally, the second email got the click.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we commemorate that loving action of Jesus, the seed that falls upon the ground and dies. This is the death we celebrate. This is the new life we proclaim. This is the vision we await.