

## **GOD OF THE FALLEN GRAIN**

John 12:20-33

Coventry Cathedral

Corrymeela Sunday, 17 March 2024

A little over a week ago, I attended my father's funeral service. Dad had been living with dementia for many years, so my grieving had already begun long before the phone call came in. The service itself was put together by my father some time back, with hymns and scripture selected and with a roster of people he knew he wanted included. This meant a reunion of colleagues from the churches he served as minister: former associates; former church musicians. An unusually talented group of people. It's not every small-town organist who can play Widor's toccata. Ours could. It was like attending Coventry Cathedral every week in rural Indiana. The sanctuary at my father's funeral was packed with people who had come to love a pastor who reliably 'comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable' with his sermons – and who led worship that was reliably God-centred, socially relevant; earthy and elegant.

As joyful and as objectively wonderful as those services were and this recent service was, I found myself in a state of deep grief during the funeral. I was not only mourning my father; I was mourning the church I had grown up knowing. Most of the people I was reunited with – people I would have seen in church week after week when I was growing up – no longer attend church regularly. Of if they do, their church does not provide for them on a regular basis the spiritual ecstasy, intellectual heft or prophetic challenge that we experienced as normal. Let me say to those here: do not take this level of excellence for granted.

### **Falls into the Earth**

Nor let grief lead you to despair. One of strange reactions I had to this realisation of my grief was that it reminded me that we Christians – because we are Christians – are constantly in a conversation with death. With letting our sense of self come to an end – because we trust that what is true and good and eternal will live on. '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.' The story of the followers of Jesus is the story of death and resurrection and death and resurrection.

I come from the Corrymeela Community, a Christian organisation that began in the 1960s by a group of young, earnest Christians who had come to believe that the Christian 'Church' in Northern Ireland at the time was (in their words) dead. The time had come for resurrection in a new form. And so they started a community that would follow the teachings of Jesus and take on the ministry of reconciliation in a new way – believing that the Kingdom of God could not be contained within denominational or even religious boundaries. They would let their concept of 'church' die so as to give life to something new – and to renew the Church with its essential work of reconciliation.

It is no secret that the Christian Church around the world is going through a time of death and resurrection – with Christendom as we have known it in the West having come to an end but with the impressive growth of Christianity rising in the Global South. The institutions of the Church are becoming less trusted and less prevalent in our culture – but many of the Christian values we take for granted are already baked into our legal system and our cultural norms. Those seeking an ethic based on the Golden Rule may not find it as easily in the church and need not seek it only from the pews. It can be found already framing our secular behaviour. Our struggle with consumerism, our problematic relationship with power, our desire to safely judge other people all continue, and Jesus's teaching continues to provide the necessary otherworldly contrast – but the church has

become so intertwined with those traits that it should welcome a death that can lead it to a more Christ-like resurrection.

### **And Dies**

And so it goes: year after year, age after age. Coventry Cathedral is good enough to mark the Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day as Corrymeela Sunday – an opportunity to highlight the work of Corrymeela as a Christian community and to remind the Church of its essential and timeless ministry of reconciliation. Corrymeela has been involved in the healing of division on the island of Ireland for nearly 60 years, but if we exist for any reason it is to remind ourselves and Christians everywhere that we are our most Christian the less we insist that everyone be like us. We become our most Christ-like as we enter into loving relationship with others very different to ourselves – letting go of our more self-centred positions and creating a just and interdependent future together.

The beauty of being here in England from Ireland on St. Patrick's Day is that it reminds us of how that saint crossed the narrow Irish Sea several times in his life seeking a just and interdependent future for people on both shores. His world was one that combined this land with that land; his story was one of enslavement and liberation, of vulnerability and power, of death and resurrection. And from resurrection to reconciliation. How many little deaths since St. Patrick's has the Christian Church experienced over the centuries? How many resurrections of spirit and vision and hope have there been? New life, new beginnings over these 1500 years?

As Northern Ireland enters into a new political reality with the return of government and the brokered deal that seeks to cushion the break of Brexit, many are experiencing something akin to grief. The United Kingdom as we knew it is less united; the Protestant establishment is far less established. The First Minister of Northern Ireland is from a party that seeks the dissolution of Northern Ireland and the reunification of the island into one jurisdiction. That would mean the death not only of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – it would mean the death of the Republic of Ireland as well. The birth of something new. And with that: grief.

It is still very unclear whether such a radical change is desired by enough citizens – or would be politically possible anytime soon. My guess is that the status quo will not last, but that a united Ireland is not the likely next step. It will be something else. But something like grief has already begun for many.

And here then is where a message of death and resurrection begins again to take root – the faith to believe that what is good and true and eternal will live on – no matter what the next political outcome. Any political structure that is about gaining or maintaining power for oneself needs to die. Likewise, if the motivation coming from our religion is to place ourselves in a position to judge others, then our understanding of Christ's teaching died long ago. New relationships of grace and forgiveness and mutual wellbeing need room to grow. As the Church moves further into a post-Christian era in the West; as Northern Ireland enters a period of change and shifting centres of gravity; as we experience death in what we have known – the essential kernel of what is right and true and divine lives on. It is in letting go of what is best for us alone that we retain what is most precious. It is in living for others that we ourselves are saved.

### **Yet Bears Much Fruit**

We are in the honeymoon period of the new arrangement at Stormont – the Assembly of Northern Ireland. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister are busy with photoshoots, showing themselves with shovels in hands and smiles on faces. The happy facades do not convince anyone that the political differences between Sinn Féin and the DUP are not deep. But they are – wonderfully – both trapped by the political reality of having to do what is best not just for themselves, but for everyone. Sinn Féin needs to prove to Loyalists that they can be trusted to

deliver good services. The DUP needs to prove that life in the UK works well for everyone. The Northern Ireland we have known is dead. Long live the new Northern Ireland.

And for me and my own grief about my father and the state of the Church? I am reminded of the theological insight of my mother. My mother once sat in a service of worship a far cry from the excellence you usually experience here or what I experienced under my father's leadership. The style of worship was the same as our home church but the music that day was insipid. The preaching was worse. The sermon, as my mother described it, was boring, non-sensical, filled with self-importance and condescension, lacking compassion or intellectual weight; was longwinded, unhelpful and dull. And at that point, in the midst of this, my mother had an epiphany I hope you, too, can enjoy – a moment of clarity as if a shaft of light came down upon her from heaven. She realised that if the Christian Church could survive two thousand years of this shit, then there must be something to it.

There is. It is the Gospel of our Lord who taught us not to fear death. Who told us we cannot serve both God and wealth. Who warned us not to judge lest we be judged. Who invited the one among us who is without sin to cast the first stone. Who commanded us to love as we have been loved. And who explained that 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' Let us then welcome the resurrection of what God has yet in store for us. It may not look or sound like what came before; but it will still carry with it the excellence we crave, the comfort we deserve and the challenge we need.

In the name of the Creator, and the Christ, and the Holy Spirit: one God. Amen.