

MONKEYS AND SEEDS

Jesus said: *“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)

Now before we think about seeds, lets think about monkeys.

In fact, let’s talk about catching monkeys. You have maybe heard this before... but it’s true, nonetheless.

This is what you do if you want to catch a monkey.....

Get a coconut, cut it in half. Hollow it out. Make a wee hole in one end just big enough for a monkey’s hand and join the halves back together again. Stick a bunch of peanuts into the hole. Fasten one end of a long piece of string to the coconut, take the other end yourself and hide.

The monkey puts its hand in the coconut and when it makes a fist to pull out the peanuts he is trapped. His hand cannot get free. All you do is pull on the string and you’ve got your monkey.

Now the monkey doesn’t want to be caught. The monkey would be happy to run away. But the monkey refuses to give up on the treats.

The monkey isn’t really trapped.
All the monkey has to do is let go of the peanuts.
And because he refuses to let go he loses his freedom.

Are monkeys really that stupid? You would like to think not.
But I’ll tell you this - people are!
People are just as stupid.

We live lives of contradiction. We want to have everything.
Instead of realizing that often one thing has to go - to allow something else to happen.
Life is about choices.

The monkey couldn’t keep its hand inside the coconut and avoid capture at the same time.

We can’t do everything simultaneously either. We have to choose.
You can’t get fitter and healthier and refuse to take any exercise. You have to choose.
You can’t be a peacemaker and a fighter. You have to choose.
You can’t work an 80-hour week and spend a lot of quality time with your kids.
You have to choose.

You can't grow into the person you really want to be and refuse to ever change.
You have to choose.

And often we look for satisfaction in things that don't satisfy.

So called "common sense" suggests we should just look out for number one.
Put yourself first and you'll be alright.
But selfishly thinking only of our own needs never leads to happiness.

Or get the most stuff. Get the most toys. The most money.
Yet building our lives on acquiring more and more stuff and possessions doesn't
put contentment into our lives. Often it makes us even more restless.

I got a birthday card that you may have seen in the shops. It's a cartoon picture of
the Dalai Lama. It's called Dalai Lama's Birthday Party.
He is opening a present given to him by some of his monks. Inside the box it is
completely empty.
And he has a big beaming smile on his face as he declares
"Wow, NOTHING! Just what I always wanted!"

Now, when we have birthdays and someone gives us a present, most of us are
hoping that it's not an empty box.
But if we are honest, there is probably another reaction to that card. We would
probably have to admit to a kind of admiration for this man.
Here is someone who has got his life together.
Here is someone who doesn't need things, stuff, and possessions to be happy.
He's content **now**.
How great it must be to feel you have all you need for life right now.
How great it must be to be free from the desire of needing more things.

Here is someone who has already found fulfillment – instead of being like so
many of us who make our happiness depend on certain things happening that
haven't happened yet.

All great religions teach not **just** that there is *another* way to live – but there is a
better way to live – a greater life that can be ours.

Jesus tells us that a life given over to God is the life that will bear the most fruit
and that those who want to hold on to life selfishly will not experience what they
are seeking.

This is the point that Jesus is making about the seed.

If we are willing to let go of our lives and place them into God's hands, then God
will be free to work with us and in us and we will be able to grow into what God
knows we are capable of becoming.
But if we refuse to give up our lives and cling on to our lives as we presently
know them, then we will just like the grain of wheat remain locked into the

present limitations of our life and so prevented from ever becoming anything more.

It is always our choice whether we give over our life to God or keep it back for ourselves.

What is interesting about Jesus' words here is I think they are self evidently true.

Several years ago a Christian college was running a week-long conference and one of the invited guests was a Hindu Professor.

Each morning they had a short act of worship with a reflection on the day's reading. And the people at the college invited the Hindu Professor to give a reflection on one of the days.

So the Professor asked what the Bible verse for that day would be.

When they looked it up it turned out to be from John 14 and included the words where Jesus says,

"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me."

(John 14:6)

So the college staff suggested to him that maybe he would like to talk about something else.

"Oh no," said the professor. *"I'm happy with that reading."*

So the morning came for that service. The Hindu Professor read out the text and said, *"This verse is absolutely true – Jesus is the only way."*

Everyone was quite surprised to hear him say that!

But then he went on to say, *"And that way – of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being – is known in all of the great religions of the world."*

What he was saying in effect was... The way of Jesus is a universal way, known to millions who have never heard of Jesus.

Bible scholar Marcus Borg said,

"The way of Jesus is thus not a set of beliefs about Jesus. That we ever thought it was is strange, when one thinks about it – as if one entered new life by believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who know the word "Jesus". Thinking this way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables. Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection – the path of transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being."

(Marcus Borg: "Reading the Bible Again....p216f)

From death to life.

Sometimes the transformation is very natural and good.

Other times it is very painful.

The AA meeting that gathers here each week had their anniversary meeting the other week. There was an invitation to people here to join them.

Its always a moving and powerful occasion – and most of all its always brutally honest and real..

One of the women who spoke said something that I believe would be true of all recovering addicts.

She said, *"I've never met a free addict who regretted the decision."*

That doesn't mean that getting free was easy - far from it.

That's why addiction is so bad.

It can be a huge struggle.

But once you make it out of the addiction – once your life is free from that 'thing' that has been burdening you for years, you aren't going to regret it.

Once something dies to bring about new life – it's going to be a good thing.

Sometimes new life emerges through tragedy.

We here collectively know about that.

A fire we didn't seek, burnt our church building to the ground.

This was a terrible event. It was a 'death' for us.

But because of that death we now have a brand new church.

We wouldn't be here in this lovely place today if the last place hadn't died a death.

Through the death, through the tragedy, comes new life.

New life emerges when we have the courage to open our hands to let something go - so that something new can take its place.

That's happening in our church right now. As we discussed how we were looking after people in the church, the Elders realised that doing something better and more effective meant leaving behind an old system.

And of course new life can certainly happen in our personal lives.

To move forward we have to leave some things behind.

But this truth about new life coming from death is why the cross was inevitable.

Despite all the stories and ideas that people around him had heard about an angry and a punishing God, Jesus comes to show that the news is far, far better than we could ever have dreamed or hoped for.

God loves us and God wants us to know that this love will never end.

Jesus comes and loves and cares and uplifts and encourages and befriends and heals. And he teaches about God's forgiveness, and he gives us the central unforgettable image of God in his story of the Forgiving Father - about the young man who turns his back on his dad, wastes his life, and yet is still loved and welcomed home again.

And at it's heart, this message of Jesus states that God longs to be in relationship with us, that God wants to forgive us for our faults and mistakes, that God's power is the greatest and strongest reality of all and that death is not the end. There is new life that comes out of death.

What a wonderful message... Except that it is words. Words...

Jesus is telling people all this stuff. And it *sounds* great. It *sounds* hopeful. It *sounds* wonderful.

But could people actually dare to believe that it is true?

This is where the cross comes in. This is why the cross had to happen. The cross is where God demonstrates the truth of all that Jesus has taught and believed.

Only by dying and by being raised by God to new life could Jesus make his amazing and wonderful claims credible.

Here are just two truths that the cross demonstrates.

GOD'S LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

The cross physically demonstrates that God's love and forgiveness will never end.

The idea of God's forgiveness was not a new thing, but in the cross it is seen in the most profound way. This was no longer just some words to hear or read – this was a demonstration of the reality of that forgiveness.

Listen to what a minister called Martin Copenhaver wrote about the cross...

"Jesus could have avoided suffering and death, but instead he chose to endure it all so that we might finally know the height and depth of God's love. By submitting to the cross, Jesus demonstrated just how far God is willing to go to express continued care. We see that our lavish brutality and extravagant indifference is nothing compared to the lavish and extravagant love of God. Though we mock Jesus and rail against him, though we crucify him in our hearts as if we were one of those who actually hammered the nails, God does not cease to forgive us."

(Martin Copenhaver: To Begin at the Beginning p46f)

The cross shows us the extravagant forgiveness of God – offered not because we deserve it in any way - but because we are loved by the greatest love of all.

Here's one another thing....

GOD'S POWER TO BRING LIFE FROM DEATH

The cross was a demonstration that God can bring life out of death.

From the defeat of Jesus comes victory.
From the worst that evil could do, God brings the best.
From the end of Jesus comes a new beginning.
From despair comes hope.
From darkness comes light.
From death comes life.

These were the words that Jesus spoke to people about. But here at the cross we see that they are actually wonderfully true.

This is what God can do. God takes the worst things and turns them around.
God brings life after death.

All of this we can see in the world around us.
As God works with us, things will die and other things will be brought to life.

And because of this, even at the end of our lives, when we face our own death, we can be sure that this is not the end of the road - but the door to a new beginning.

John 12:20-26

March 22 2015 (Lent 5)