“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

As we approach the end of Lent, we are reminded by Jesus of the miracle of germination. Despite all appearances of being dead, a grain of wheat can, under the right circumstances, germinate and sprout seedlings from which abundant new plants flourish. Those circumstances, of course, are much better understood today than they were in Jesus’ time. The grains, of course, while they may seem dead, we now know, they are in fact dormant, ready to spring into action, as it were, when the conditions are right. And while grains need the right soil, that, in itself, is not sufficient; they also must have, in varying quantities, water, oxygen, light and darkness, and the correct temperature in which to germinate. And so, in the miracle of germination, what could have laid dormant for years (indeed, Israeli scientists have enticed a grain of wheat 2,000 years old into life), can – when all the conditions converge - suddenly respond and grow into new life. And from a tiny, insignificant grain of wheat comes something quite extraordinary, indeed what comes into being, if nurtured and sustained, is the essential ingredient for the bread of life.
And Lent itself is a period of dormancy. Whether we like it or not, we are held captive by the season. None of us can escape it until the time is right. As this morning’s text reminds us, the time is right only when the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. For even Jesus was dormant; even he was the symbolic equivalent of a grain of wheat that needed the right time, needed the will of the Father, to provide the circumstances, the conditions, for the divine grain to bring forth universal new and eternal life.

This can of course be all quite troubling if what transforms the seed or, more to the point, what transforms our death into life, are things beyond our ability to control. Yes, our minds can acknowledge we must let go of this life in order to keep it for eternal life. But letting go and surrendering ourselves before God’s love takes a leap of faith that even Jesus struggled with. Dependency doesn’t come easily to any of us.

That particular lesson troubled even Jesus when, feeling dread of what was to come, for a while he considered praying for the Father to save him from this hour. But it couldn’t be so. The hour had to come. Even Jesus was ultimately subject to the right, subject to the will of the Father, just as we are.

So, what then are we to make of it? Here we are approaching the cusp of Easter. With the pale light of the resurrection beginning now to be perceptible on the horizon after living these last weeks in the shadows, waiting for the hour to come. We also know that the darkest hour is yet to come. We know what must happen on Good Friday. We know that the divine grain must fall into the earth and die. We also know, however much we spend our lives purposely avoiding and evading the fact, that a Good Friday awaits us all; the pangs of death, we too must all experience.

It is easy to believe that our faith is just about being loving and being nice to each other and others. But that would be to impoverish our faith. The love that we are called to share comes from the profound solidarity we all should have for each other. For we are all to be purified by the flames of death; we are all to face the greatest challenge of our existence; we all must face the risk of non-existence, of being that dormant seed that never sprouts into new life. The love that we are called to share is the fruit of the most fundamental fact of our existence, that this life will come to an end – and yet we have a pledge, a pledge written in blood. We have Jesus’ promise of eternal life, the grain that is gifted to all our hearts.
And the price of that eternal life? Jesus tells us in our reading from John that the price of eternal life is to hate this world – but Jesus’ sense of dread when faced with his own death, despite his divine confidence in what would follow, injects a more nuanced meaning into this sentence, particularly when his love for this world was so abundantly clear to everyone he met on his way.

Surely, he meant that holding on too much to this world, when ultimately we can do nothing other than let it slip from our grasp, is clearly foolhardy – so let us hold it as lightly as we are possibly able to. Surely, he knew that letting go of the known for the unknown is for most of us desperately hard to do, but he also knew that that the hope of the world to come, founded in the promise he made to his disciples, is already alive in our hearts and eases the way – so let us care for and cherish that gift that lies within. Surely, he knew that the seed of faith, already planted in our hearts, was sown by a loving God; and that that seed already bridges the now and the then; that the life to come is already contained in that seed, albeit perhaps, for the moment, dormant – so let us live joyfully confident in the knowledge of our salvation. And surely his Body is present and alive and loving, to be built and strengthened, in this world as well as in the next; that in some extraordinary way, even now we participate in the world to come – so let us be fed and sustained by his Body and Blood made present to us.

And so the utter dependency we have on God is not something to be dreaded as a reduction in our own autonomy. It is a relief; it is a comfort. For there is no surer basis for our eternal life than the love of God.

So, yes, it would be inhuman not to feel anxious, knowing that the reminder we are given by the Church on Ash Wednesday will come to be. But the antidote to the sorrows of death has already been given to us. The seed planted within us all is a seed like no other. For when Christ was lifted up from the earth, all people were drawn into his embrace, all people welcomed into his love and care; all people called to share in His eternal life.

Amen.