Holy Tuesday

John 12:20-36

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‘Falling’

The wisdom of the world tells us we should always be in control; the foolishness of God tells us that sometimes we will fall.

I don’t know if any of you, like me, sometimes have dreams in which you are falling. That sense of trying to hold the next rung on the ladder and somehow it disappears, comes away in your hands and you wake up with a start. Dreams like this can come when I am feeling overwhelmed and stressed with issues that I am finding hard to manage. When things beyond my control impact heavily on my day-to-day life and I am struggling to find the right way of coping, my subconscious clearly reads this as falling. A loss of control and a sense of powerlessness spills over into my dreams.

I know that many of us are experiencing difficult dreams and problems with sleeping as we live through this extreme period of uncertainty and fear.

The events of Holy Week have this sense of loss of control. At some point, Jesus seems to simply let events take their course. There is no longer any hiding from the authorities, there is no resistance to the soldiers, no defence to the accusations. For his friends, this must have been deeply confusing and immensely frightening.

Why was he not capitalising on the grand entrance of Palm Sunday, why was this wonderful crowd pleaser, brilliant preacher, holy man of God not wowing the crowds, out-speaking his accusers, drawing on his supporters to take control of the situation?

And where was God? Where was the God Jesus spoke to with such intimacy, proclaimed with such authority and pointed to as the life giver? If Jesus was the Messiah then why was God not smiting the enemies and restoring the fortunes of Israel through the anointed one?

The powers and principalities appeared to be closing in and Jesus seemed to let go, to free fall into the arrest, trial, and the finality of the crucifixion. And his friends find themselves caught in their own nightmares of fear, doubt and a level of deep despair – there was nothing they could do, it was all falling apart.
In terms of the wisdom of the world it was all disastrous. The project of Jesus’ ministry that his disciples and companions had invested their lives in appeared to be failing. Everything they had dreamt of was in free fall.

Yet, in the words Jesus had shared with them there are pointers to a different wisdom. In the foolishness of God’s created order a grain of wheat needs to fall to the ground, appears to die and yet it is through this process that life, fruit, food for all comes into being. *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground, it remains a single grain but if it dies it bears much fruit.*

The seed falls as if discarded, as if it is of no importance and yet from the place where it falls new life springs up that provides fruit to feed people. In fact, the seed has become the new fruit.

Jesus is a man discarded, counted as expendable by the coalition of the state and religious authorities. He is to be removed. Yet, his falling, foolish and wasteful in the eyes of the world, will in fact be in God’s wisdom the precursor to life in all its fullness.

We get glimpses of the fully human nature of Jesus struggling with this surrender to the chaos, ‘Father, save me from this hour’ he prays. Later we will remember him in the garden praying that it might be different, that the cup might pass. Part of him is hoping that there may be another way, some re-grasping of control, a way out, as in all the good stories, when we find the last minute reprieve, the heroic action that saves the day.

Yet, in God’s wisdom this falling is necessary and Jesus can endure it because even in the midst of the chaos there is a deep trust in the one who loves him. The light is fading and yet that does not mean that the darkness has overcome.

So, what does all of this mean for us as we gather this Holy Week in a time when we all feel out of control?

Most of us live in a culture that places immense emphasis on being in control. We struggle when we feel that things are spiralling out of control. We live with myths that seem to hold us responsible or teach us to look for people to blame, when the chaos sets in. Yet, as we are all now experiencing, even the most organised of us have to contend with the things beyond us, the randomness of the suffering of our world.

We want to be in control and to know where we are going, what is happening? How long will this last, when can we get ‘back to normal’ whatever normal is?

To fall implies a letting go of control.

To fall is to fail; our downfall is our worst moment, is it not?

Cities fall; as do people.

It is to be reduced: to come to nothing.

And yet, we also know that to fall, to let go may be about an opening up. People pay money to fall, to bungee jump, free fall out of an aeroplane loving the sensation of being unencumbered.
We also speak of falling in love, that powerful overwhelming sense of allowing our life to become full of another.

To fall is to let go. To be vulnerable. To accept that some things are beyond our control both good and bad. To fall is to go with the flow; to cascade, like a river or waterfall.

Jesus seems to allow himself to fall down the waterfall, be blown in the wind tossed between those who fear him, discarded as a problem to be done away with - and he is lifted up on the cross –

For those living through the experience it makes no sense, it seems to be about failure. It seems hopeless. Jesus becomes the discarded one, and it is not surprising that Christians came to associate him with the servant described in Isaiah as ‘a man of suffering, despised and held of no account’.

And yet, Jesus tells us things are not necessarily as they seem. There is a different perspective, deeper truths and richer wisdom. The discarded seed will bear fruit, the letting go of control over one’s life will not lead to failure but to new freedoms, the despised will become the one to whom all look for hope, the dead will be raised up and the crucifixion will be followed by resurrection.

This is a falling into life.

Jesus could endure all of this because despite everything he trusted in the love of God.

We are called to be people of faith but that does not mean that the road will be easy. Prayer is not like a slot machine. There is no guarantee that if we do it right we get what we want.

There will be times when, like the disciples, we can only see chaos. When God seems powerless, when our hopes are dashed and what we feared comes to be. Times when we feel that God has dropped us.

We need in these times to look around at the world God has made; full of life. Where what is dead becomes the seed for what will be, where the barren months of winter begin to show the fresh shoots of spring and then we need to trust often at the times we feel least like trusting in the God who made this world, in the God who loves us and those we love.

We may not understand the times of darkness, when all seems to be lost. We may not know how long we will have to walk through the wilderness, yet Jesus points us to the hope that will be fulfilled and the love that will not fail us.

The wisdom of the world tells us to take control and the foolishness of God tells us that when we fall we will be caught. As Dame Julian tells us in the end all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.
Rilke's *Book of Hours, 1905*

How surely gravity's law,
strong as an ocean current,
takes hold of the smallest thing
and pulls it toward the heart of the
world.

Each thing---
each stone, blossom, child---
is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,
push out beyond what we each belong to
for some empty freedom.

If we surrendered
to earth's intelligence
we could rise up rooted, like trees.
Instead we entangle ourselves
in knots of our own making
and struggle, lonely and confused.

So like children, we begin again
to learn from the things,
because they are in God's heart;
they have never left him.

This is what the things can teach us:
to fall,
patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
before he can fly.