

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit.

The grain of wheat is a central image in this part of the teachings of Jesus. It is the strength of the grain to face death for the sake of the life that will follow that matters.

The Prince, or ruler of this world, teaches that the grain of wheat should fight! "Let other grains die, but not me!" But Jesus, the only Son of God, goes knowingly, and without complaint or retaliation, to be lifted up on the cross. It is on the cross that the enemy is defeated, not destroyed, but undone by relentless love for the sake of others.

Now last week on Wednesday it was the feast day of Thomas Cranmer, and in talking about him I got quite worked up. Cranmer is the architect of the Anglican Church. He lived in a time of change which has been compared repeatedly with our own age. Culture, communication, ideas were all in rapid flux. The old ways of life were faltering and everything was new and uncertain. Cranmer, to cut a long lecture short, took the best of Roman Catholic church practice, and the best of the New Protestant movement and put them together into Anglicanism.

Anglicans have revised his work over and over in the last few hundred years but respect for his vision has been a cornerstone.

The Roman Catholic Church had become corrupted by power and money. Clergy were controlled and themselves required to control the people. Sin and Guilt were liberally handed out and money and obedience were the remedies. To be well with God required gifts to the church, and attendance at Mass and confession to priests, and sometimes expensive pardons from the Pope. God was inaccessible behind a hedge of clergy, saints and structures. Holy Scripture was forbidden to the people. They heard it in Latin only, and interpreted by priests. The Protestants were people who protested against this. They were reading the Gospels, and disobediently letting it be known that Jesus taught that God is not far off and angry, but close by and loving. They taught that each of us is invited by God to be in a relationship of our own with God, and that God knows our names and longs to be loved by us. For the Protestants the role of the Church was to help people find this God, not to keep God as inaccessible as possible.

And the Catholics had worship which was beautiful and uplifting. They had music and colour and richness that reflected the beauty and wonder of creation. They had the sacraments which let God touch us not only with words and ideas, but also with bread and wine in our mouths, with cleansing water in baptism, with the warm balm of oil and all the other ways nature acts as a message of love from the Creator. The orders of bishops, priests and deacons, the monks and nuns who dedicate themselves to the inner path of prayer and holiness. All this was to be saved as well, not thrown out as it was being in Europe.

But perhaps the greatest work of Cranmer was to articulate all of this in the Book of Common Prayer. Instead of prayer being the work of the ordained and consecrated people it was to be the work of all and anyone. So the Offices of morning and evening prayer are in the book. Compline, the evening office is there. Baptism and marriage are no longer secrets, but there they are in the book! Any Commoner, which means not Nobility or Priest or Monastic, any Commoner could have access to these things which had been reserved. Anyone could now follow the life of holiness!

Cranmer was utterly "burying" the old pattern of Church. Never again, after Cranmer, would the English peoples worship in the same way! A new thing would arise.

And what did it most effectively was the language he used. He wrote prayers in a book in common English. Common prayers in the common language. Prayers to which the scholar and the shepherd, the baker and the housewife could all have access. We find them beautiful and poetic, and indeed they are well written. But Cranmer's first desire was that they should be "in a language plainly understood of the people." It was the use of a printed, accessible book that could be in anyone's hands, and that anyone with basic literacy could understand that made the revolution of Anglicanism so effective.

The old Church "died", in blood and fire and over decades, but it died. And out of its loss came the rich fruit of which we are inheritors.

Well, are we?

2 out of 3 services I lead a week are in the BCP. One is from the BAS. This is probably the pattern for most Anglican churches.

The BCP is in Elizabethan English. Most of us, if time-warped back into Cranmer's England would have difficulty understanding a conversation. We cope with the BCP because we are used to it. But when we use it we are not being Common People or using Common Prayer, but very uncommon. We are not being true to the Spirit of Cranmer, merely using his written words.

Even the BAS is behind. The BAS was a wonderful and brave attempt to be faithful to the vision of Cranmer and bring our worship back into the language of the people. But it was largely written in the 70's and 80's, a generation ago. And that generation has seen the rise of TV as a huge culture changing force, the loss of the slow change of life our grandparents taught us to live by. We have seen the freedom of women in our society blossom, we have seen communism and racism, both normal in the 50's, become hideous in our own eyes. Internet, cell phones, cable, fresh fruit and vegetables all year round are all new. Accessible available transport, foreign vacation travel, life expectancy beyond 70. I could go on. More has changed since the BAS was written than in the previous 100 years.

In the Anglican church we sing music that is lodged in an echo of medieval monasteries, unknown to 99% of the population. We have hymns that are unheard beyond Anglican walls. We arrange ourselves in seating like the schoolrooms that have been closed or redesigned across Canada decades ago. And while every other public meeting conveys words and images on huge screens we juggle two books and a pile of paper as if the photocopier had just been invented.

Our old churches are leaving us, and we have a moment in our histories to enter the burying and rising again. But will we have allowed our past to die and be buried? Will we let it go? Dare we trust God to raise up a new thing, so odd that it resembles the old as little as the green shoot rising from the earth resembles the hard brown seed we put into the ground? Would we not rather opt for resuscitation? Opt for kick-starting the old thing back up again with as few changes as possible? When the disciples took down Jesus' body from the cross they buried him. We would probably be trying for the defibrillator or for cardiac massage.

Like Cranmer we need to take the best of the treasures of the past into the new church. But if we take everything then we will die with it, and a new building on Kennedy will have a For Sale sign on the front in less than decade. We need music rooted in our culture today. We need newer words and images. We need seating which feels like something from our community's experience. We need ways of being Christian which are different from the world's way, not because they are archaic, but because they are Christian,

We know how to do the old stuff and we feel safe with it. All over backwards-facing Canada Anglican churches are diminishing. It is not a faithful thing to just peter out one day. It is a matter of faith to say to God, we, with our teacher Cranmer, will trust you again, and try a new thing, not knowing how it will work.

We will not trust the ruler of this world who counsels in certainties and in victories. We will look at one who died in the trust that God would use his death for a blessing.

We are two weeks away from the celebration of both death and resurrection. I know that there is endless heartache for the losses each congregation has experienced. I know there is frustration because we do not have a clear and precise plan of how exactly we will rise again. I know there is irritation that this amalgamating body is not a well-oiled machine which runs itself. But if we had all this in place there would be no need for trust, or faith or hope. Our God, annoyingly, leads us only one step at a time. Cranmer only had a vision. Jesus only had trust as he died.

But what fruit!