

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

So, you open the pack of seeds.... You fill the pot with soil... you scatter or push in the seeds, cover with more soil if needed... water carefully and put in a suitable location... and you wait... and wait... and sometimes (not always) the seedlings come up...

When Jesus is talking with Andrew and Philip, he uses this picture... talks about the cycle of life and death and renewal... the familiar cycle that anyone in an agrarian society would get... that Lewis, the farmer in our church family, gets... that anyone here who has scattered cress seeds on cotton wool will know about.... A seed is buried in the ground and dies...but as it dies... it bears much fruit... because it sprouts... produces a plant... that in its turn flowers and produces more seeds... it's the life cycle...

Jesus is talking about himself... about what is about to unfold... that he is going to die.... And that it won't be a meaningless death... but a death that will be productive... bear much fruit... just as wheat or cress seeds do...

What happens to Jesus is like what happens to our seeds... but better... it's not simply part of the cycle of life and death that we're familiar with... but something more wonderful... life and death *and resurrection*... because here the vicious cycle of mortality is broken... the clock is reset... what Jesus does echoes out beyond the moment, back into the past.... way into the future... for all time and beyond time.

As you may remember, the big question around the council of Nicaea is about who Jesus is... God or human... with church leaders thinking this out... and coming up with most of the statement that is the creed we say today... and right in the middle we read this:

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

Not only is Jesus God... God of God, light of light... he's God who is crucified... God who dies... and God who is restored to life... *On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.*

So, what do we mean when we say *for our sake he was crucified*? Jesus died *for us* in some way... died so we don't have to? died on our behalf? In our place? It's not easy to get your head round the whole thing...

Over the Christian centuries there have been several goes at explaining.

Along with our liturgy, the hymns we sing often give us a good idea of what we believe... what those who came before us believed... so let's pick up our hymn books and look at a couple... please would you turn to (423)... John Henry Newman's great hymn Praise to the holiest in the height... and see verse 2... O loving wisdom... *a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came*... that's Jesus... where Adam gets it wrong, Jesus, the second Adam, does being human right... here, he's a heroic participant in a cosmic battle between good and evil... who eventually emerges victorious...

Let's move on... to (number 507)... There is a green hill far away... *we believe it was for us he hung and suffered there... why? That we might be forgiven... to pay the price for sin*... that's kind of what redeemer means... someone who buys back a thing or a person

Jesus pays the debt... makes things right... enables us to *go at last to heaven*...

And now the hymn that's a modern classic... Stuart Townend's In Christ alone: *'Till on that cross as Jesus died The wrath of God was satisfied For every sin on Him was laid*

What we have here is more like a law court... justice must be done... a sentence has been passed... someone must take the punishment... and Jesus does that on our behalf... he takes our place.

These hymns set out different ways of thinking about what Jesus' death means... different pictures... none of them on their own can explain something so unimaginable... that God would choose to die for God's own creatures...but they each give us a hint...

The word we use often to talk about that idea... this thing God in Jesus does.... is *atonement*... This is the technical term... so, if you study theology, it's *The Atonement*. Actually, it's a kind of made-up word – a couple of small words shoved together to make a new word... *at – one-ment* ... When you say it like that, you can tell that it originally meant making peace, reconciliation...mending a broken connection ... putting God and creation back together, in relationship with each other, in the way God had always intended ... I think this is a really helpful way of explaining a bit of what happens on the cross... what happens through Jesus' death and resurrection...

Because of sin and evil... because of the wrong things we do ... and the deep patterns of wrongness and decay in the world, we are out of connection with God... Jesus' life death and resurrection repairs that disjunction... And the creator makes the first move... makes peace with creatures... fulfils the loving purpose by which and for which everything was made...

Here's the practical bit: this at-one-ment... God's act of reconciliation should shape our lives, too... Paul, writing as we heard to the church in Philippi, reflects on how Jesus willingly gives himself up ... willingly takes the form of a slave.... Is willingly subject to death on a cross... Paul writes not just to remind them and us of the shape of Jesus' story, but to encourage us to consider the shape of our own lives ... *let this mind be in you*... let this shape be your shape...

When we stand to declare our faith, we are saying.... This is Jesus and this is us... as we follow Jesus, we are willing to give up our comfortable life, our status in the eyes of our colleagues or neighbours, our space in the train carriage, as it were, so others can get on board, too...

Last thing: we've been thinking so far about what Jesus does for *us* By which I have mostly meant us humans... but that's not nearly enough... what Jesus does is for the whole of creation... redemption... saving... at-one-ment ... is for every blade of grass... every mouse and lion and beetle... our Christ shaped, cross-shaped lives of service are to be lived in relation not just to our fellow humans, but to all the things God has made...