

Lent 5B
Peace, Seattle
March 22, 2015
John 12:20-33

SEEDBED

PRAYER: Holy One, may the seed of your Word find its place on the good soil of our hearts, that the harvest may come when you deem it time. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

We had found refuge from the noonday sun among a copse of trees, as we visited with newfound friends as we waited our turn to enter the tombs.

The ground on which we stood had once been a thickly layered plain of Volcanic ash which, over the eons, gradually cured to become what the Romans call tuffa stone.

One of the qualities of tuffa is that it's soft enough to be easily excavated, but once exposed to the air, it hardens to the point that it can carry substantial weight. This place along the Appian Way outside the ancient city of Rome, on land no one wanted, was perfectly suited for burial chambers, and so the story of the Catacombs began.

Under the Roman Emperor Nero the fledging movement called "Christianity" was considered a "strange and illegal superstition." Those who followed this new religion were mistrusted and kept apart. They were suspected and accused of the worst crimes. They were persecuted, imprisoned, sentenced to exile or condemned to death.¹ Their desire to bury their dead NOT by way of cremation, the pagan Roman custom, but through direct burial of the body was another thing that marked them as different.

After years of petitioning, 2nd century Emperor Commodus finally granted Christians the right to bury. But in granting this right, the Emperor had three stipulations:

1. Burials had to be outside the city walls.
2. The means of disposing the bodies would have to be sanitary.
3. The burials would have to be on private property.

The least expensive parcels were the large expanses of tuffa here at Callixtus and elsewhere, on which no food could be grown, so this is where Christian burials began.²

As the Christian community developed the tombs, digging down layer by layer from the surface, and adding skylights and ventilation shafts along the way, the passages eventually reached 60 feet deep. In this burial ground alone, a half-million Christians had been buried.

When our names were called we followed our guide as she descended down the stone stairway into the cool, narrow passageways of the catacombs. We were getting as close as possible to the first generations of people with whom we share a common faith and a common destiny, and it was deeply moving.

As we walked through subterranean passageways we saw early Christian symbols painted on the walls and ceilings of some of the family tombs: Fish and shepherds, lamps, doves, anchors, and others.

These symbols, many of which had reference points in that day's Roman culture, had become infused with new meaning as Christians used them to express their faith in a God/Man who'd suffered

¹ See the Christian Catacombs of Rome website: <http://www.catacombe.roma.it/en/simbologia.php>

² The main architect assigned to the task of building these subterranean tombs was named Callixtus and the name stuck.

the worst kind of death Rome ever conceived—crucifixion—and had been vindicated by God in his resurrection on the third day.

The Jesus these symbols celebrate commanded his followers to love—not to slaughter—their enemies. To become one of his followers was to place oneself on a clash course with the mightiest Empire the world has ever known. What courage! What Spirit to persevere against all odds, trusting that the ultimate victory belonged to God.

During an era when Christian teachings were anathema to the Empire's interests and Christians were labeled "atheists" for their failure to participate in Roman cultic practices, the catacombs became places apart and the larger family burial rooms provided spaces and the opportunity to pray.

The catacombs were not secret places, however. They were well known, and this fact was not lost on the Roman authorities. During the three centuries that the Christian faith was illegal and violently opposed, being caught in the act of prayer could lead to summary execution. The story of early martyrs testified to this.

Very truly, I tell you, says Jesus, 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.

Encountering the catacombs now, I imagined them as a vast bed of sown seeds, awaiting that time when, like grains of wheat sown in the earth, they would rise into a new, resurrected life!

At this point in John's gospel, Jesus and his apprentices have entered Jerusalem for the last time to celebrate Passover. Enemies both within and beyond his inner circle are scheming for his arrest, and every move he makes is under suspicion.

When an anonymous group of God-fearing Greeks comes looking for him, something like a switch is thrown, and the HOUR Jesus has spoken of since the very first week of his public ministry, the HOUR toward which his entire three-year ministry has been driving, suddenly arrives:

THE HOUR HAS COME, Jesus says, FOR THE SON OF MAN TO BE GLORIFIED.

Then, Jesus lifts up an image from the fields to tell his companions about the nature and necessity of what's about to happen.

UNLESS A GRAIN OF WHEAT FALLS INTO THE EARTH AND DIES, he says, IT REMAINS A SINGLE GRAIN; BUT IF IT DIES, IT BEARS MUCH FRUIT...NOW MY SOUL IS TROUBLED. AND WHAT SHOULD I SAY—'FATHER, SAVE ME FROM THIS HOUR'? NO, IT IS FOR THIS REASON THAT I HAVE COME TO THIS HOUR.

There is an ancient legend; a legend which tells of ADAM, the first human being, who, as he lies near death, sends his son Seth on a journey. He asks him to go to Eden, to the angel who guards the entrance, and to get from the angel some of the Oil of Mercy which God had promised humankind.³

Following the directions of his father, Seth goes; and he finds the Garden of Eden.

The angel who guards the gate permits him to enter but he refuses him the Oil of Mercy. He presents him instead with three seeds from the Tree in the center of the Garden—the Tree of Life.

³ The legend is preserved in *Aurea Legenda*, a collection of medieval hagiographies, collected by Jacobus de Voragine.

And when Seth returns to his father with these seeds, Adam is so overcome with joy that he no longer desires to live. Three days later he dies, and Seth, as the angel had instructed, plants the three seeds in his father's mouth.

Lo and behold, the seeds germinate, becoming a three-trunked sapling which absorbs into itself the blood of Adam, so that the life of Adam is in the tree.

We've been watching the tree grow these weeks of Lent, and today we see the waters in which the Tree is rooted, and the fish who swim there, fish like ones drawn on the walls of the catacombs by our Christian sisters and brothers—fish which gave voice to the earliest Christian confession:

Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior. [ixthus]

There are many more stories about this tree. You've heard some of them on Wednesday evenings, and you will here more of them if you come to the Easter Vigil this year.

The point is this: like the early Christians before us, we are the seedbed for new life.

The Christ seed has been planted in us, and the Spirit is nurturing that seed so that it grows and blossoms and produces fruit 60, 80, 100 fold.

Nicole, AJ, Chris and I caught a glimpse of that seedbed yesterday as we watched 130 elementary kids at Camp Lutherwood sing and learn and—despite the torrential rains—splash and play and make new friends, and experience that Christ seed, being nurtured more deeply and in new ways.

Jesus, you see, is just dying to go from out here to in here (heart); and when we come to the Table and eat this bread—grown from wheat was buried in the ground so that it might come to new life—we fulfill the very prophecy Jesus uttered. His death leads to new life in us.

So come and eat; and then, be that seedbed for new life, so that others may know the joy of Jesus!

Amen.