

## In the Dying We Live

*By Linda Rex*

**March 17, 2024, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Preparation for Easter or Lent**—When I was growing up, one of my favorite places to visit in the backyard was the avocado tree. Each summer the sun was blazing hot, and its big limbs and large leaves provided a shady place to play. When the tree was laden with avocados, we delighted in eating the fruit with a spoon like a special treat.

Because of this happy memory, a few years ago I took the pit of an avocado I got at the supermarket, and put it into a small glass of water. When it finally sprouted, I planted the little seedling in a small pot. Since then, the spindling tree has grown to be about three feet tall, bearing leaves about the size of the sole of a shoe. The original seed became part of the root of the tree, and soon there was little evidence of the avocado seed the tree had come from.

In the New Testament reading for this Sunday, Hebrews 5:5–10, the writer points out that the Son of God isn't the one who decided to be our high priest, but he was chosen by the Father for this task. As the Son of God in human flesh, Jesus Christ experienced suffering, but through prayers and supplications, trusted that his heavenly Father would deliver him. Having been perfected in his trust and dependency upon his heavenly Father in the midst of acute suffering and death, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for us, serving as our high priest. Elsewhere in the book of Hebrews, we read how Jesus, because of all he went through, is the perfect high priest for us now, interceding on our behalf, offering our prayers and supplications as well as our worship to the Father, and receiving from the Father and giving to us all that he desires for us to have.

The process of coming to be our high priest through suffering and death is what Jesus describes in the gospel reading for this Sunday, John 12:20–33. Jesus clearly saw his upcoming crucifixion and death, and knew what he was facing. He described it to his listeners as being like when a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies. The process of dying, for a grain of wheat, isn't really a death so much as it is a radical transformation. The grain of wheat ceases to exist in its present form—in effect, it dies. But it is still very much alive, though, beginning to take another form as it puts down roots into the soil and the sprout pushes up out of the ground, reaching into the sunny sky.

If the grain of wheat were to lay in the ground and never make this change, it would be because there was no life in it. The grain of wheat would simply rot away and become part of the soil in which it was placed. But when it come to Jesus, in his crucifixion and death, there was every reason to expect that what came up out of the soil was going to be new life. The One who was buried in the tomb was the Son of God in human flesh. Even though the human body died, this was not the end. Out of the tomb arose Jesus in glorified human flesh, ascending to his heavenly Father, to serve as the high priest on our behalf—the One who is uniquely equipped by his suffering and death to intercede for us, to advocate for us, and to help us.

The process of growing and developing, whether for trees or for people, involves both positive and negative aspects. To gain strength and durability, a person, or a tree for that matter, must experience challenges, opposition, or suffering. The negative aspects of one's existence, when given to God and borne in union and communion with God in Christ, can actually become the means by which God strengthens us, grows us up into Christ, and forms his likeness in us.

One of the things our culture today doesn't seem to embrace well is the idea of suffering, difficulty and struggle. To feel pain or loss is often seen as something to avoid, rather than being seen as something that, when embraced and accepted and learned from, may actually be a means by which we may grow and become more like the humans God always intended us to be. Yes,

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it's probably good to avoid or ease pain and loss when it occurs, but it is also good to ask the Lord what it is we are needing to learn in the process of dealing with it. Perhaps we may even ask the Lord, as Jesus did with tears and supplications, for God to remove the ordeal from our lives. Indeed, Jesus pleaded with his Father to that end. But ultimately, the true solution was and is in Jesus' surrender and submission to the will of his Father. As Catherine Marshall likes to say, this is the one prayer which is always answered: "Not my will, Father, but your will be done."

It is in this place of dying, of surrendering our will and our control of the situation into the hands of our loving Father, that we find our true life. Indeed, it is in this place of dying that we begin to rise into new life. Our true life is not in what is right before us, but in the person of Jesus Christ—in our union and communion with our Father, through Jesus, in his Spirit. It is in this place, as we go through the challenges of this life that we discover eternal life, now and forever.

*Our heavenly Father, sometimes life can be really hard, painful, and frustrating. It is difficult for us to understand why you allow things to be the way they are, especially when we have to experience pain and loss. Grant us the grace to, in all honesty and authenticity, pour out our hearts to you, but to also yield to your perfect love and grace in submission to your will, through Jesus our Lord and by your Spirit. Amen.*

*"So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you'; just as He says also in another passage, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.' In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews 5:5–10 NASB*

*"... And Jesus answered them, saying, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, "Father, save Me from this hour"? But for this purpose I came to this hour. .... Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.' But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die." John 12:20–33 NASB*