

Persistence bringing Restoration

We draw on life together

As this crisp and somewhat windy change of seasons continues, my mind returns to the Huon Valley and Estuary in Tasmania. This area is the heart of what was said to be ‘the Apple Isle.’ A rich and fertile delta, it is a fantastic place for growing cultivars of different apples, cherries, berries and cool-climate grapes.

One of the most recent imports into the valley is a United States cultivar, the Jonagold apple. It is a cross between the Jonathan Apple and the Golden Delicious. I’ll share this culinary description of what is fast becoming one of the world’s most loved apples, even though it is not readily available in Victoria.

It might seem strange to begin a sermon about Jesus’ interaction with the Canaanite woman and Paul’s admonishment of the Gentile community in Rome by invoking an apple. Of course, you could be quick and work out that the alleged fruit in the Garden of Eden that was born on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was an apple. It may not have been. I would favour a pomegranate, but let us not let tradition influence the story.

“All for an apple, an apple she for took, as clerk-es findeth written in their books”

Alas, clerkes findeth not the fruit of the tree other than it contained the knowledge of what is right and wrong, acceptable, unacceptable, life-giving or decaying, life and death itself.

The barren and unfruitful world of Rome

Let us recap the readings from the letter of Paul to the Romans so far. In the opening chapters, Paul addresses the Roman Christians, the Gentiles. In 46 CE, Emperor Claudius, fed up with the infighting between the proto-Christians and Jews, expelled the Jews from Rome. More often than not, the Jewish Christians demanded proselyting the Gentiles into Judaism first and adherence to kosher rules.

The Gentiles did not see this as being acceptable. Many of the practices of the Jewish contingent would place them at odds with their community. Eager to protect their rights as citizens of Rome, considerable tension had arisen. Debates about who was in and who should be out led to widespread discontent, eventually spilling into the city streets. Communities were

polarised, and the resultant brawl seemed to have little to do with the love and service of the Lord Jesus nor the beginning of a new movement of acceptance and growth.

Understandably, Claudius took the option that the Jewish Christians and the entire Jewish community did not belong in Rome and exiled them.

After going the way of most Emperors, Nero was declared the new ‘son of God’ on the poisoning of Claudius. Rather than going into the incestuous nature of the court of Claudius, it is firmly accepted that Claudius’ fourth wife, his niece Agrippina, the sister of the late emperor Caligula, fed the emperor, and I apologise in advance that this touches on something in the news here of late, a death-cap mushroom. The reasons given were that Claudius was about to restore to the inheritance of the Empire his son Britannicus, over and above Agrippina’s son, Lucius, known and feared by all as Nero.

It would seem Mark Twain is once again correct; history does not repeat itself; it simply rhymes.

Romans, apples, Jews, proselytes, mushrooms? Where is this going? Well, it turns out that Nero was fond of things Jewish, and the exile was revoked. Remember that after giving the eulogy for his foster father, Claudius was “deified”, and thus Lucius Nero became the “son of God.” Keep that in mind for later. A year later, to make sure, Nero arranged for both his mother, Agrippina, and his step-brother Britannicus to be reunited with dear Uncle Claudius.

Having invited the Jewish people and the Jewish Christians back into what could only be assumed as a fiery environment (yes, another spoiler!), the battle between the sects was on again. Who was in? Who should not be in? What should we eat? And why should we comply with the law?

Disputes once again spilt over into the streets. It is then that Paul decides to intervene to point out the error of both sides and reminds them of a simple truth that they all had forgotten. It mattered not if the wider community were at odds with them or if they were being cruel to one another regarding their factions and power plays; nothing in all creation could separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

One would have hoped this would settle things down again, but the old and proper ways of power plays and grandiose pomposity weren’t too far beneath the surface. Paul desperately tried to get the community to unite as one that would prosper in growth and togetherness.

In chapter 11, we read Paul at pains to point this out: God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?”

35 Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?”

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Paul arrived in Rome and attempted to keep order, teaching and sharing in the fellowship of the community. He was also joined by Simon Peter, the rock on which the Church was to be founded. There, Peter was seen not only as the foundation but as the bridge (pontifex) between heaven and earth. It would have been a formidable teaching double.

Sadly, a scapegoat was required after the burning of Rome in 64 CE and after Nero had returned to Rome to help in the recovery. It is often held that Nero started the fire, but it would seem unlikely given he was not even in Rome. He opened his palaces; he paid for much of the recovery from his expenses. Tacitus suggested that Nero blamed the Christians to deflect the truth from himself. Most other scholars deemed it just Nero’s way to have good sport by executing a once-again problem community that was not life-giving or affirming.

Giving Life to new Cultivars

One of the many problems in growing Jonagold apples is this. The pollen of the Jonagold tree is sterile. It can neither give new life nor receive new life of itself. It relies on the cross-pollination of nearby trees. Those trees could be Jonathans, golden delicious, or even pear trees. New life is only gained by allowing external input to bring life into the community. Without that external import, the tree remains barren. It will give forth beautiful apple blossoms, but in terms of bearing fruit, it is not able by itself. It requires an external action to see the best fruit coming forth.

Consider for a moment the fine pearl that Jesus talks about as being like the kingdom of God. Without an irritant or external presence, that pearl will not develop. Sometimes, we need to be stimulated in order to produce our best.

The woman from Cana interrupted Jesus in his rest. Tyre and Sidon are the fabulous beaches of the Mediterranean. I can imagine Jesus resting quite nicely on the beach. It is an external presence that disturbs his peace. The disciples are anxious that Jesus be allowed to relax and do their best to stop the external party from bothering him. Trying to see what the fuss is, Jesus engages with the non-Jewish woman. He rebukes her and points out that his mission is to the lost tribes of Israel.

What happens next is the pollination of the ministry of Jesus. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs under your table.” The fruit of Jesus attracted the woman into the heart of the assembly of disciples. It was a good fruit, with bitter-sweet overtones and a good flesh. It was the same fruit that was needed to bring new life to her daughter, and she believed that Jesus was the one who could provide.

A sterile beautiful plant was about to be cross-pollinated. Responding not because of race or position, Jesus marvels at the faith that was being introduced. He at once removed the ‘demon’ from her daughter. And let us not kid ourselves; the demon is not a word that means ‘devil’ or ‘evil’; it is a word that means power. Whatever power was being held over that young girl was not allowing the fullness of growth; it was hindering and killing a life of great potential. The Messianic mission was about to be to the ends of the earth, not only to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Whose nature is always to have mercy

All for an apple, an apple that she took, as clerkes findeth written in their books.

For this mother, a queen bee to her household, the pollen of life and freedom was spread across the tribal and electoral boundaries. Sadly, like the Jonagold tree itself, once established, it could be a beautiful dwarf tree of 3 to 5 metres with unique blossoms. But without the love of God and the reaching in of those in need, it will remain a single and sterile tree.

The great prayer of Cranmer that many of us know. Love contains this one petition that reminds us of the need to allow the external to become internal so that we, too, can bear much fruit to the glory of God: “Trusting not in our righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercy.”

Cranmer continues: “Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your son, Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that he may ever dwell in us, and we in him.”

It is about us. Our faith is always outward. If it isn’t, then Paul’s belief that we would come to know that faith in God will not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord is a lost hope and a distant reality.

The fruit we hear about today is the same as the tree in the Garden of Eden that contained the knowledge of Good and Evil, life and death, truth or ignorance. Whether we partake in that fruit will depend on what we allow to pollinate and encourage our faith. We could eat, live or die, or remain a pretty thing to be marvelled at, even though it produces nothing that gives life to others.

Great is the Mystery of our Faith.