

installation sermon 3 September 2016

John 15:9-16 Love and stuff

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. NRSV

My father's first cousin, Franklyn Pain, tells the story of a visit to his grandparents, Bishop Arthur and Annie Pain, at Bishopcourt here in Sale. Apparently, one day his grandmother gave him a watch. When he showed it to his father. He was told sharply to return it! When he tried to do that, his granny said, "no, you keep it", and he did, treasuring it for many years.

He also tells of some towels drying on a rail on the second storey. Apparently, a towel blew out onto the roof, and Franklyn, being the smallest, was held suspended by his feet out the window to retrieve the towel!

These stories are told by the same man who, many many years later, when he met my husband Nikolai for the first time, said, "You know I don't believe in women priests, don't you?" and then, "I don't know how you could get married again after your wife died". Off to a good start, don't you think?

This same man, my cousin, Franklyn, later gave me his father, Bishop Pain's eldest son's, home communion set. It is a very special gift to me, especially after Franklin's comments to Nikolai.

So why do I tell you all this?

Well, it's something about the mixed nature of love, my great grandmother's love, and my cousin Franklyn's love and God's love.

Jesus says in our gospel reading, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you", and the epistle reading certainly expounds on the qualities of love, 'the still more excellent way'.

Let's explore our gospel reading a bit more deeply. This passage from John's Gospel speaks directly of love. Love characterises the Creator's relation with Jesus and Jesus' relation with his disciples. It is interesting that the language of command also appears. The command is simple:

'Love one another, as I have loved you'.

In typical fashion, John has it all centre on Christ and reduces the commandment, simply to love. It is not, here, an admonition to keep the ten commandments or even a revised version of them based on Jesus' ethical teachings.¹

Jesus offers himself as the model of love. He gave his life for his friends (15:13). John is probably thinking of love that is willing to go so far as to suffer danger and death to express itself.

It is worth noticing how John pictures what happens when this love is fulfilled. He speaks of joy, joy that affirms human joy as the fruit of divine intention. Occasionally we need a reminder about this. The goal is not a purity which is spotless and stark, morbid and serious, but joy which fulfils itself in love. I am hoping my time here will be marked by deep joy.²

There is a story told of Mahatma Gandhi getting on a train just as the train pulls out. As he jumps onto the train, one of his sandals falls off onto the tracks. Gandhi quickly slips off the other sandal and lets it fall onto the tracks too. Someone near him asks, "Why did you do that?" Gandhi replies, "Now someone will have a pair of shoes to wear,"³ There's love for you, and joy!

Notice also how the issue of status is addressed. Jesus abandons the imagery of service in favour of friendship. Perhaps we could say: 'God does not want slaves; God wants companions.'

This creates a very different model of spirituality, and way of doing things, if we are to be friends of God, and not slaves.

Of course, friendship also means letting the other be, and acknowledging **that** otherness in its integrity and sacredness. Some people either want to dominate or be dominated.

The model here is different. It does not compromise the integrity or holiness of the other, but affirms companionship in such holiness.⁴

The language of intimacy returns with the notion of being chosen. The focus here is on why the disciples are in this special relationship: they are in this relationship to bear fruit (15:16). With this the writer brings us back to the

¹<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkEaster6.htm>

² ibid

³ *Prayer* Joyce Rupp, Orbis Books NY 2007 p104

⁴ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkEaster6.htm>

image of the vine in the verses before this gospel passage, and returns to the intimacy which assures that we are listened to and loved. We will be heard when we ask (15:16). We ask no more, no less than the fulfilment of the relationship in love.

We end with what we have already read, the command that we love one another. The passage points backwards and forwards.

Backwards it recalls Jesus washing the disciples' feet. That action expressed Jesus' lowly love and modelled how they should love one another. His love models love, but also generates love.

The passage also points forward to the great prayer of Jesus about unity. The unity was not 'airy-fairy', but relational and practical, in sharing material resources, in deed as well as word (1 John 3:17-18).

That is what love is about, not mushy feelings, but action. Love is a verb, it is about bearing the fruit of love, fruit that will last.⁵

Let me tell you a story about fruit, pomegranates to be precise! Look around this cathedral, can you see them?

Our gospel concludes:

'And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.'

I want to tell you a story, which has encouraged me these last few months, and has many more layers to explore as this ministry unfolds.

When I came here for my interview for the position of Dean of this cathedral, on 26th May, the day began with a tour of the cathedral, and deanery. I must say, from the time I was invited to consider the position, Nikolai and I have both been excited, with a strong and growing, "yes" at the core of our being.

Now, I need to tell you about what happened the week before that interview day, when I was in Perth for the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction Conference, with speaker, Belden Lane. On the first day of the conference, Belden spoke of the word of God in scripture and the word of God in nature.

He invited us to find a teacher in nature, a tree, which might speak to us of God. I wandered round the site, and was drawn to a pomegranate tree, not really a tree at all, more a shrub. The Pomegranate tree was covered in ripe and ripening fruit. It was amazing! I tasted some of the fruit. It was moist and rich, sweet and slightly tart. I sat back and observed the tree. I realised it was a very ordinary, spindly tree, a bush I might not even have noticed, if not for

⁵<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkEaster6.htm>

her fruit. It spoke to me of fruitfulness, and Jesus calling to bear fruit, the fruit of my relationship with God. It also spoke of overflowing generous hospitality, with seeds spilling in abundance, and it spoke of community, the seeds grow together in the fruit. It is okay to be ordinary, to be everyday, but with God, the results can be surprising!

A week later, instead of going to the Canberra Goulburn Clergy Conference where I was supposed to be speaking, I was in Sale, at this cathedral. Nikolai and I wandered in and were met and welcomed by the lay chaplains. As we walked up towards the altar rails, you'll never guess what we saw! Baskets of pomegranates! I've never seen pomegranates in church before, have you? Pomegranates, which I understand were used at the Pentecost service! Fruits of the Spirit.. my jaw dropped.

A little while later, I was ushered into a room at Bishops court to wait for my interview. I stood up and looked out the window, and there was a... pomegranate tree!! I was astounded!

The following week, I was leading a retreat for Uniting Church Civil Chaplains at Kincumber near Newcastle in NSW. I don't know that I was at my best, because, I was waiting to hear the result of my interview. I had been told I would hear by Tuesday, and had heard nothing! It was torture. My mind reviewed all the possibilities, maybe I didn't get the job, how could I be so wrong? I prayed, until I came to the point of acceptance of whatever the outcome would be. I laid it all in God's hands, yet again.

Wednesday was the last day of the retreat. One of the chaplains was to lead morning prayer, and beforehand, she said to me, "Is it okay if I light a pomegranate candle?" "Beg your pardon," I said. "A pomegranate tealight candle," she said. I didn't even know there were such things! "Sure," I said, a bit shaken..

On the way home to Canberra, about an hour and a half from home, I checked my emails on my mobile phone, and there was a letter from Bishop Kay offering me the job! I was so relieved, and excited..

When I got home, I googled pomegranate, as you do, and discovered its rich symbolism in the Christian as well as other religious traditions.

Pomegranates figure in many religious paintings by the likes of Botticelli and da Vinci, often in the hands of the Virgin Mary or the infant Jesus, and also on vestments, and in buildings. The fruit, broken or bursting open, is a symbol of the fullness of Jesus' suffering and resurrection, of fruitfulness in Christ. It is the colour of love, but notice that only in breaking open are the seeds spilled.. My friend Leo has painted me a Pomegranate Icon for my office..

This week, my friend Glenys told me of her friend Gayle Ockenden who was given a pomegranate stole for her ordination. She tells of being in formation group at Bishops court. There was always a garden walk as part of it,

apparently. She says Bishop Jeff Driver would take a pomegranate from the tree in the garden and eat as they walked..

Now, I wait to see the further unfolding of this symbol, and of the giftedness of this place, St Paul's Cathedral, Sale. I believe that together, we will bear much fruit, fruit that will abide, fruit built on the faithful ministry in this place of many many people over many many years.

I expect juiciness, I expect prayer, colour, beauty, intuition. I expect sweetness, and some tartness. I expect a flowering of the fruits of the spirit in this place. I expect faith, hope and love to flourish, in good times and in bad as we abide in God's love, with joy welling up in our hearts, loving one another as we have been loved by the one who is always loving, always faithful.

As Michael Leunig says,

Love is born

With a dark and troubled face

When hope is dead

And in the most unlikely place

Love is born:

Love is always born.

I come as beloved companion of God, following the command to love. I look forward to seeing love being born again, here, today, the love which is the gift of relationship with the Christ.

Susanna

3 September 2016