

Being pickled in the Gospel!
Deut. 6.1-9; Matt. 25.31-46

22.11.2020

My oldest friend, of some 60 years, had a mother who made the most fantastic pickled onions, the like of which I have never found any others to compare! She would pick quite small shallots, prepare them in her particular and secret way, and leave them in the spiced vinegar for at least five years, before she would present them to lucky ones like me. And the taste was sublime, if that is how you can describe the taste of a pickled onion. And the onions were darkest, darkest brown, completely imbued by the pickling vinegar, and as crisp as can be. They were delicious!

Well what on earth has this got to do with our readings, with Aotearoa Sunday, with Stir up Sunday, with the Feast day of Christ the King and the last Sunday of the Church's year! That's the potpourri of festivals we have today.

We human beings do not develop our understanding of life and how to live life in a vacuum. We all know that from the moment we are born, indeed conceived, we are soaking up everything that is going on around us. Our environment, the other beings who interact with us, above all in the first few months of course for most of us, our mothers, are huge influences on who we are and who we will become, Our characters and our perception of what life is like and how we live it in a way that promotes what we have learnt to be of ultimate value [for good or ill] is learnt from our earliest experiences. Along with our genes, we are shaped by the values and beliefs of those who bring us up. For some sadly as we know, these experiences and values are anything but loving and creative, and many are scarred for life as a result.

So we absorb the environment and the culture in which we are raised and it becomes part of us.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians shares a prayer which I am sure we would share too for every baby we baptise and indeed for the whole of humanity ' I pray that the God of Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may

know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.'

Faith in God then doesn't simply happen. The deep and naturally human yearning for goodness and love which is within all of us, for all of us are made in the image of God, is to be nourished and nurtured. As the vinegar imbues and flavours the shallots, so our individual humanity is flavoured and altered by the beliefs and values which we soak up in our growing up and beyond.

The Gospel for today lays out in very clear terms the way to these 'riches of his glorious inheritance', and what the life in Christ looks like in actual practice. We know these words of Jesus so well. To feed the hungry, drink for the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner. . The sheep in the parable didn't even realise that they were serving Christ by feeding the hungry and thirsty. It was simply in their nature to do so.

They have grown up being pickled in the gospel of love. 'Love God and do what you like.' The goats didn't recognise that they were totally ignoring the needs of others because they had grown up to be self-serving and selfish and didn't comprehend that they had any responsibility for anyone else. A very different sort of pickling had gone on for them, They had not experienced or they had rejected the gospel of love and life which imbued the sheep.

What a responsibility we have then as disciples, to both deepen and be imbued by our faith and to pass it on to others, living the faith, living the love.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is not a part time occupation. It is about the whole of our life, it is about the whole of our being, every fibre, and we need to re-member constantly that we live and move and have our being in this God of Love, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. And for those of us who live here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi is a further ingredient in our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ in this context. It's not an optional extra.

Talking of ingredients reminds me that today is also Stir up Sunday. Yes today, as all good Anglicans would know, especially those of us who hail from England and a Northern Hemisphere Christmas know, today is traditionally the time when we get out the big pudding bowls and stir up our Christmas puddings, making sure that every one around has a chance to do their bit of stirring and make a wish. There are plenty of stirrers around this place I 'm sure! Our collect for today reminds us of the centuries old tradition when we were more a culture of rhythms and seasons and family connections, than this is the day. *'Stir up O lord, the wills of your faithful people that, richly bearing the fruit of good works, they may by you be richly rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'*

There is soft fruit, different sorts but looking very much the same, and hard nuts. There will be frothy ale [I use Guinness!] and aromatic brandy [or rum!]; mixed candied peel all sticky, all spice and nutmeg, cinnamon and ginger; plain flour and soft brown sugar; tangy orange juice and the freshest of eggs. What a mixture! What a wonderful combination of tastes we will enjoy on Christmas Day.

And what a great metaphor for the Church! It's almost as good as Paul's description of us as a Body with all the parts needed to make up the whole. The Church is like a great fruit pudding. How rich and tasty it is depends on so much on the ingredients blending together, contributing to the whole, for the purpose of living out the Gospel.

Pickled onions and Christmas puddings, what an amazing couple of metaphors! As we prepare to begin a new Church year, I want to remind us that claim that we carry a message of hope and new life for the world and all people.

I want to say this to us as we live in the context of a world riven by consumerism and a culture of fear, where the same old tired truths shame us all as the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the environment reels under our exploitation and greed, as we fight one another and claim God to justify our killing, where people are shown scant respect for our various cultures and human rights; where too many goats seem to be a calling the shots

In such a world I want to say this to us. If we are not imbued, flavoured in a commitment of body mind and soul to a way which reflects the teachings and example of the one we acknowledge as the Prince of Peace, then what are we doing here today? This is what has imbued this parish over the years and whatever our future may be it is our Christ-centred mission now.

What sort of Gospel are you, me pickling. What sort of pudding are we stirring up? One that is fit to be savoured and enjoyed, giving rich and satisfying food for the hungry and spiritually yearning. Or one that is bitter and dry, that gives us no sustenance, no nourishment, no hope, that does not feed a hungry world so desperate for love. I know the sort of pudding I want to cook up with you - a rich fruit pudding for a new Church year! And whenever we forget, or lose our flavour, spiciness, this Eucharist confronts us again – ‘do this to remember’. Do this to remember what it’s all about. Amen, so be it.