

## Different and Yet the Same

Epiphany 4 (C) 1 Corinthians 13; Luke 2.22-40

‘A glass and a half of full cream milk in every half pound’, has in these diet conscious days been transformed into ‘a glass and a half full of joy.’ Is there anyone here who doesn’t know what I’m referring to? If you don’t, then there is no way you can be awarded the CDM! Or how about:

Everyone’s a fruit and nut case,  
Crazy for those Cadbury’s nuts and raisins,  
When you’ve got your feet up  
What a joy to eat up,  
City gents of consequence and blokes who dig the street up:

Everyone’s a fruit and nut case,  
Crazy for those Cadbury’s nuts and raisins,  
When you’ve got your feet up,  
What a joy to eat up,  
Cadbury’s Fruit and Nut! (1979)

A finger of Fudge is just enough to give the kids a treat  
A finger of fudge is just enough until it’s time to eat.  
It’s full of Cadbury goodness and very small and neat  
A finger of fudge is just enough to give the kids a treat.

It’s very hard not to know what these ditties and slogans mean.

But how about:

Have a happy sandwich.  
Every diet needs a little wiggle room.  
It’s not delivery – it’s Di’Giorno.

The chocolate chips everybody wants. Chips Ahoy. They go fast!

And if you haven’t the faintest idea what I’ve talking about, here’s a big clue:

Kraft singles – goodness squared.

Most of us just don’t know what these things mean. Jell-O, Di’Giorno, Chips Ahoy, don’t register with us.

I don’t want to say anything about the Kraft bid for Cadbury. I use these slogans only as a way of showing how hard it is for meanings cross the Atlantic – despite all the TV shows, films and language we share. How much harder it is then to cross the boundaries of time, language and completely different societies and life experiences.

It is all too easy to assume that we can easily understand Saint Paul in that famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13. After all love is a constant topic in what we see, and hear and read: endless songs, plots in the soaps, rom coms at the cinema, and all the rest. We all know to what the word ‘love’ refers. Or, we think we do—this state that we seem to fall in and out of with sometime joyous, and sometimes dire consequences.

But hang on, ours is a take on love that is highly psychologised. We are all children of Freud here. Thinking of our lives in an introspective way comes easy to us. We’re familiar with the ideas of interior motives, subconscious influences, and a highly individualistic understanding of the uniqueness of each one of us. We fail to appreciate just how recent such understandings are, and we read them back into ancient things and ways where they didn’t exist. And this isn’t just that New Testament Greek has four words for ‘love’ when English only has one. There’s more to it than that.

When Saint Paul writes of love – of agapē – our individualistic, psychological, and introspective categories don’t figure at all. Instead he is talking about what the virtue that holds the Jesus-people together is like. That belonging that welds together this community and makes it the church, Christ’s body now. This is the allegiance that bonds together the group, individually and corporately. Paul lived in a collectivist world where the group of which you were a part was crucial to your very existence. Indeed individualistic existence as we know it didn’t figure at all – hence all the concerns about honour, status, and right and proper behaviour as people

related to this or that social grouping, we see in scripture as well as in other documents of the ancient world.

So if we want to get nearer to Paul's understanding we have to translate *agapē* by something like 'group allegiance' or 'communal love'. It's a shock to discover that, but read the passage again replacing 'love' with 'group allegiance' and you'll see what I mean. And this isn't a lessening or a lightening of the idea of love – the qualities of determination and will that we usually consider part of Christian love remain – but are now seen as all the more vital since they have to do with the very existence and continuance of the Jesus-people. No *agapē*, no group allegiance, no Jesus-people. But where this *agapē* holds sway it has an immense power about it – indeed it is imperishable. Group allegiance, communal love, never ends.

Faith, hope, *agapē*, are the hallmarks of the Jesus-people. These things last. And of these abiding and eternal values, the greatest is group allegiance, *agapē*. What a shock, Saint Paul really does overturn our ordinary thinking. The love required of us to be followers of Christ challenges our individualistic preoccupation.

A similar awareness also applies to the story of Jesus' presentation in the Temple. We feel easier with this story because it so much more obvious needs translation. We recognize that the terms are unfamiliar in a way that we don't when it comes to an idea like 'love.' I know I need to know that in Hebrew custom a male child was presented to the Lord forty days after birth. Usually a lamb and a pigeon were brought by the child's parent. Joseph and Mary bring two pigeons because they can't afford the full offering – theirs is an impoverished peasant's offering. The purpose of the offering was to buy the first-born male child back from God, the child being a gift from God on loan to the parents. As God had saved the Hebrew first-born sons from Pharaoh in Egypt through the blood of a lamb, so every first-born son was purchased from God through the offering of a lamb. These things we know we need to know to understand what going in the story, but there are other things that are hidden by their apparent familiarity.

Take just one – the ages of Simeon and Anna. That Simeon is aged is implied, whereas we are told that Anna is 84. What are we to make of these elderly two? Well, we mustn't let our understanding of age obscure the fact that these two were very special just by being as old as they were. In the days of Jesus, 90% of people were dead by their mid-forties, and it seems that no more than 3% of people reached their 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Most ordinary people died in their thirties. No wonder these two were venerated and respected – the power of the Holy Spirit in Simeon recognized and Anna acknowledged as a prophet. What are we being told in this? Are we meant to compare them to the great faith figures of the Hebrew past who lived long lives? Are we being told that Jesus is acknowledged from the first by those who hold the communal memory in their very selves? Does it mean that the tradition in which they were steeped has to be recognized and somehow celebrated by anyone who would follow Jesus now? All those things and more, I suspect. We have to get inside, as near as we may, the devotion and expectation of Simeon and Anna. And we only have a chance of doing that if we recognize their difference from us.

On 6<sup>th</sup> July 1944, on the second anniversary of her going into hiding and two months before she was her and her family were arrested and sent to concentration camps, Anne Frank wrote in her diary:

*'We're all alive, but we don't know why or what for; we're all searching for happiness; we're leading lives which are different and yet the same.'*

'Different and yet the same.' The Anne Frank exhibition starting her this week doesn't leave her story as yet another Holocaust horror, a thing of tragic history. Instead it uses her story, her life – different and yet the same – as a way into issues that face youngsters now who are of an age similar to that of Anne when she was writing her diary. A way into understanding difference and otherness, as well as similarity and commonness, made all the more poignant by the realities of her suffering and the vitality of her vision. I mustn't too easily assume I understand.

Christ needs of us his people a willingness to learn that goes beyond the categories we are comfortable and at home with. Christ needs of us his people a love that is not constricted by our own experience. Christ needs of us recognition of the long memory of faith that sympathetically reaches into those rich seams of difference we are tempted to ignore.

Only the crumbliest, flakiest chocolate,  
Tastes like chocolate never tasted before.

If that can be sung of mere chocolate, what delights await those who knowingly share the bread of heaven?

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