

# The pick of the crop

Jeni Parsons *reflects on* Acts 8:26-end

**P**lease let me be picked for the team this time." That was my childhood prayer at school during games. It wasn't that I liked games but the shame of once again being the last one chosen was painful to that small foreign-sounding seven-year-old. Being included was really important. I'd travelled twelve thousand miles and had a broad Australian accent and it was long before *Neighbours* was popular on the telly. That childhood experience is one that lots of people can identify with because they somehow didn't fit as a child.

The Ethiopian eunuch was different from those around him. As an important person (though

still a servant) he had a chariot all of his own; he could read; he is likely to have had a different skin colour from Philip and he was unable to have children of his own. Here is a mixture of prestige and loss. He is reading from the book of Isaiah and there he reads of a servant of God who, rather than receiving good treatment, had to bear a weight of misery which seemed to include being destroyed, maybe without descendants to mourn him. The Eunuch can identify with this. Philip's response is to show him within this passage how God has granted adoption to all through being baptised into God's family so that no one is left unchosen, or un-choosable. 🍏

**God of the Ethiopian eunuch, and all who are different for whatever reason, hear our longing to be chosen by you as your own loved one. In our baptism may we know the joy of adoption by you. Amen.**

## Fruits of the Spirit – a meditation on Galatians 5:22-23

### *Love is like an apple*

by Caroline Hodgson

*In his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23) St Paul lists nine qualities which are known as the Fruits of the Spirit.*

To love one another is Jesus' most fundamental command – a staple, nourishing rule to live by. And it's true that a dose of love every day – like an apple – keeps us in good spiritual, emotional and physical health. Just as an apple tree can grow in an inhospitable

environment, love can flourish in the hardest of hearts. The love in a marriage can be likened to apple blossom – a beautiful flower that ripens into something satisfying and fulfilling. Family love lies at our very core – as in Proverbs 7:2, when the father tells his son to "keep my teachings as the apple of your eye". If we read the story of creation in Genesis we find that the apple, like love, has a forbidden side. By contrast, Christian love is pure and unconditional, and extends to all people. 🍏



## World Laughter Day

### *Today is World Laughter Day.*

*Lisa Tulfer joins in the merriment.*

In fourth-century Egypt a monk called Evagrius Ponticus developed the idea of Christian vices (which would later evolve into the Seven Deadly Sins) and virtues. One of the vices was sadness, the failure to respond joyfully to God's love, and the corresponding virtue was *hilaritas*, or Christian joy.

Humans express joy through smiling and laughter, so you

may want to take part in World Laughter Day today. Started in Mumbai in 1998 by Dr Madan Kataria, the annual event raises awareness about laughter and its benefits – it is believed to increase people's well-being, including through the release of endorphins. The logo of Dr Kataria's international movement has the tagline "World Peace through Laughter", and the day seeks to unite humanity through the shared language of laughter. In Copenhagen in 2000, almost ten thousand people gathered for a "Happydemic". In 2020, events used Zoom and Skype to connect people laughing around the world.

Laughter is contagious. Can you do something today to spread a bit of laughter? 🍏

“Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”

Psalm 126:2

# Abundant love and joy



God of abundant excess and joy, you are our mother who brings us to birth and gives us our task of loving all the rest of your children. Give us strength for such a task and the joy in fulfilling it and finding fulfilment in it. Amen.

## Fruits of the Spirit

– a meditation on Galatians 5:22-23

*The pomegranate represents joy*

by Caroline Hodgson

With its abundance of seeds, the pomegranate has long been a symbol of bounty and fertility, particularly in the Jewish tradition. As such it has a natural association with joy. In the Song of Songs the rapturous bridegroom compares his bride's cheeks to the halves of a pomegranate. Some Renaissance artists – Botticelli and Raphael among them – painted the Madonna and Child with a pomegranate prominently displayed, while many Italian

Renaissance fabrics have pomegranate patterns woven into them.

Meister Eckhart said: "To rejoice at another person's joy is like being in heaven." If we're feeling low on joy, an unselfish act is a guaranteed booster. It might be an act of giving, or taking more time to listen closely to what someone is saying. But it must be unconditional. If we expect or hope for anything in return for our kindness – even if it's just thanks, recognition or acknowledgement – we run the risk of ending up feeling hurt. But if we practise unconditional generosity our joy levels increase. ☺

Jeni Parsons *reflects on* 1 John 5:1-6

As if being born isn't hard enough, the New Testament reading today suggests we have to be born of God as well as our mother. That double-birth puzzle will come up again in a few weeks and we can leave it until then, but today's reading has momentous consequences for the Christian community because it says that if you love the parent, that is, God, then you will love the child, that is, all who are born of God.

Now I don't know about you, but loving everyone who says they love God is pretty tough going. Loving

God is the easy bit, because God is lovable much of the time, but loving people... that's hard. It also suggests to me, at least, that I can't make a distinction between those who love God in church and those who love God in chapel. Maybe we could take this further and say that I can't make the distinction between those who love God in a synagogue or mosque and those who love God on the hillside or anywhere else. Suddenly this love business is getting out of hand!

How typical of the God we know through Jesus to get out of hand – the God who gives abundantly, loves enthusiastically, accepts unconditionally, so that we might slowly begin to live in that inclusive, joyful way. ☺

## Rogation Days

by Lisa Tulfer

*Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday this week, the three days before Ascension Day, are Rogation Days. Lisa Tulfer looks at their origins.*

"Rogation" comes from the Latin *rogare*, to ask. According to one theory, they originated in fifth-century France, when the Bishop of Vienne called three days of fasting and prayer for deliverance from a spate of earthquakes and storms.

By the eighth century it was part of the Christian calendar, and since then Rogationtide has been observed by processions around the perimeter of the parish ("beating the bounds" – literally, hitting the boundary marker stones with sticks), with prayers for the fields, good weather, and plentiful crops. In more urban parishes there are sometimes prayers for local shops, businesses and schools. Following a decline since the eighteenth century, "beating the bounds" has seen a revival in popularity in recent years, although nowadays processions and parish walks are often held on the Sunday before Ascension. ☺

“To rejoice at another person's joy is like being in heaven.”

Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1328),  
German theologian, philosopher and mystic

# Rooted and fruitful

Jeni Parsons *reflects on* Psalm 1

The double image in this short psalm is meant to grab us. The images of trees firmly rooted and chaff being blown away are powerful – be steadfast not flimsy! Psalms take on this pattern of vivid image in the middle to give substance to the other bits, the beginning and ending. It's like a piece of music with an introduction and conclusion, or a piece of fabric with borders of embroidery.

So the tree is deep-rooted, planted in a place that will keep it alive, however dry the season, fruitful in its proper time. The chaff by contrast is light and flimsy, a breath of wind scatters it and it is gone.

The ones who are like the tree are not just people of faith but their "talk" and their "walk" match, so that their faith makes a difference to their decisions and actions. The water they need for their sturdy deep-rootedness is found in the things of God.

The chaff-like folk are different because that rooting is missing – so much so that, when the temptation comes to go along with the crowd and ridicule goodness, or benefit from the corruption of those in power, they do it without a thought. It's not that they're not "religious", but it hasn't percolated through to their roots and their decision-making is awry. 🍷

## Fruits of the Spirit

– a meditation on Galatians 5:22-23

*The olive, a symbol of peace*

by Caroline Hodgson

The olive branch was God's symbol to Noah that the storms were over. Throughout the Bible and in the sacraments, olive oil is used as a balm to anoint, soothe and heal. The concept of peace can be daunting, as in "world peace". But it doesn't have to be overwhelming. The healing balm of prayer is the best way for the individual soul

to find peace. As the thirteenth-century Dominican writer and preacher William Peraldus wrote: "Prayer is a dove, the bird of the Holy Spirit, which brings the olive branch and wins peace."

Before you pray, try this simple meditation. Close your eyes and breathe naturally. For a few breaths, let your attention settle on the in-breath, and the out-breath. This will clear your mind of the day's clutter, before you turn to God in prayer. 🍷



God, may our deep rooting be in you, so that our lives bear fruit for the sake of others. May what we say with our lips show in our lives, for the sake of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

## Food in the Bible

### Bread

by Caroline Fletcher

Bread was a staple of the biblical diet. Loaves were often large, round and only a few centimetres thick, so they were broken rather than cut, just as Jesus broke the bread at the Last Supper.

As is the case today, bread was usually made from wheat, although poor people used

barley and this is what the loaves used to feed the five thousand were made from (John 6:9).

Yeast was sourced by saving a small amount of fermented dough from each batch to include in the next. The woman described mixing yeast into flour in one of Jesus' parables would have done just this (Luke 13:21). However, during Passover Jews were forbidden from using yeast at all and were instructed to eat only unleavened flatbread. This type of bread is quicker to make, not needing time to rise, reminding the Israelites how their ancestors had to eat in haste before fleeing Egypt. 🍷

“ I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

John 16:33

Connecting faith and daily life



# The flowering of new life

Jeni Parsons *reflects on* Ezekiel 37:1-14

**H**ow strange to have a reading about a valley of people so long dead that nothing remains but their dried-up bones, on a day like this, when the celebration is of the life-giving Spirit of God. This vision comes from six hundred years before Easter Day. In these dry bones all hope is gone. There is no life and there is no future. This was the situation for the exiles, in captivity and away from their home and land, their food and their language, their customs and their God, so they thought. But Ezekiel prophesies otherwise to them in their despair. The word of the Lord is not to be denied, the word of the Lord is powerful and God calls this

lost community “my people” and will not let them go.

So at Pentecost there is a renewed expectation from God that, though the Church can seem dried up, though we as individuals of faith can seem dried up and lost, God will not let us go. God is in the resurrection business!

This re-creation, not so much as individuals but as a people, encompasses everyone wherever they’re from, whatever language they speak and whether or not they expect the blessing. Resurrection isn’t the end point but a new start. Resurrection doesn’t ask politely and wait till we’re ready, so look out! 🌸

**God of resurrection life, take our old dry bones and breathe new life into us, our institutions, our expectations, our hopes and plans. Take and remake us so that others can know that you will not let them fall. Amen.**

## Fruits of the Spirit

– a meditation on Galatians 5:22-23

*The almond represents patience*

by Caroline Hodgson

*“The word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see a branch of an almond tree.’ Then the Lord said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.’” (Jeremiah 1:11-12).*

The almond was known as the watchful tree, because it was the first tree to flower – the earliest sign of spring.

Patience is not a very fashionable quality in our fast-paced world of goals and deadlines. “Most

men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it,” wrote Søren Kierkegaard. And it’s well worth rediscovering the art of slowing down. Growing flowers, plants or herbs from seed is a good way to learn patience, because you can’t hurry the seasons but must wait for nature to do its work.

The lesson is that the key to patience is faith. “Strengthen your patience with understanding,” wrote St Peter Damian, “and look forward serenely to the joy that comes after sadness.” And indeed, after the long winter, the almond blossoms. 🌸

“**When you strip it of everything else, Pentecost stands for power and life. That’s what came into the Church when the Holy Spirit came down on the day of Pentecost.**”

David Wilkerson (1931-2011), *The Cross and the Switchblade*

## Walking with Poppy

*What’s best*

by Gillian Cooper

Poppy has recently been diagnosed with diabetes. She is coping well with the treatment regime, but there is one aspect of it that particularly displeases her – she is no longer allowed treats between meals. Our walks have taken on a new ritual: Poppy trots along, or greets

another dog, and then comes for her reward. When it doesn’t materialise, because clearly I have forgotten the rules, she nudges my leg hard with her nose. Eventually she settles for a pat on the head, with the kind of sigh that expresses how she feels about my inadequacy.

We too do not always understand what is best for us. We are inclined to think God is not giving us our due reward. It is natural to think that, because in some respects our understanding is as limited as Poppy’s. But it is good also to remind ourselves from time to time that God really does know best. 🌸

Connecting faith and daily life

# We all belong

Jeni Parsons *reflects on* John 3:1-17

**N**icodemus could not understand how anyone could be born twice. He seems to have missed the very truth he lived within. If his mother was Jewish at his birth, he was both her son and a son of Israel and thereby of the God of Israel. Nicodemus already has this double birth, but Jesus wants to open it wider.

It's a question of belonging: who is in this family and who is outside? Can anyone belong? The readings of the last few weeks are all about this and it is a struggle in the Bible, as it is for us.

This conversation in the Gospel is what allows those of us who wouldn't fit the previous pattern to be included, and that inclusion is wide because God is generous in affection. Our mothers may not be Jewish, yet we belong. We are not all male, yet we belong. Whatever the colour of our skin, orientation, intelligence, wealth or righteousness, we still belong.

It has taken the man from Nazareth, the one who taught and healed, loved and preached, died and rose again, for us to know that inclusion. Sometimes the Church forgets and has to repent. Sometimes the Church refuses repentance and is lost for a time, until God finds her and brings her home. 🍷



**God, you show us in Jesus that we are not condemned to be isolated from you, but held in your loving embrace as part of the family you make. In our belonging keep our eyes open for those not yet included and bring us home together. Amen.**

## Fruits of the Spirit

– a meditation on Galatians 5:22-23

*The pineapple is a symbol of kindness*

by Caroline Hodgson

In Caribbean cultures the pineapple's spiky leaves are meant to deter intruders, while its sweet yellow flesh is given to guests as a sign of welcome and hospitality. In the eighteenth century the exotic, expensive pineapple was the height of style at Spanish and French dinner tables, where it would double up as table decoration and a mouthwatering dessert.

Christian kindness extends far beyond lavish entertaining. Indeed, we don't even have to invite people into our homes to extend a Christian welcome. The key is to take it out into the world. Get into the habit of "watching" your own appearance when you meet other people. When someone intrudes on your busy thoughts, do you allow them to see your spiky side? Or do you open up, soften, and greet people with a generous expression and an open heart? The secret is to practise spiritual suppleness, so we can be flexible enough to set our self aside and put the other person first. 🍷

## Finding God on the smallholding

by Jeni Parsons

Hatching is in full swing now and the chicks and ducklings are popping out of the incubator in regular succession. I've also put some guinea-fowl eggs under a broody hen and the tiny ones, called keets, have hatched and are beginning to grow with the close attention of their "mum". She's really pleased with

them and is rearing them well, teaching them and guarding them.

Isn't it interesting how such tiny creatures flourish with a bit of close attention and their inbuilt instinct for survival? I don't use a prayer book any more but spend my time with the birds and animals on the holding, in wonder, love and praise. This "first scripture" of which we are a part, this natural world, this created order, is enough to cause me to sing "hallelujah" with Leonard Cohen, with massed choirs, with k. d. lang. If you haven't heard it, then give it, a listen. 🍷

“There is no law which lays it down that you must smile! But you can make a gift of your smile; you can be the heaven of kindness.”

Pope John Paul II (1920-2005)