

18 February 2024

Genesis 9:8-17
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

A few weeks ago I went to the supermarket and was puzzled and frustrated to find that there were no apples. A day or two later I saw an item on the news explaining that the lack of apples was (of course) one of the effects of the devastation from Cyclone Gabrielle twelve months ago.

The dairy farm on which I grew up had a low lying section that was prone to flooding – the paddocks had been humped and hollowed so as to maximise the chance that there might remain some standing room and grass for the cows above the waters; and I have vivid recollections of the flood pump running day and night off the tractor's PTO, pumping flood water over the stop bank into the creek.

But of course these memories of flooding and the damage it can do pale into insignificance against the scale of the devastation we saw twelve months ago, and of which we've been reminded in news coverage over the past few days.

The earlier news items about the apple shortage however also reassured us that new crops of apples were almost ready for harvest – many of the orchards having made a very good recovery – and so we would only be without apples for a couple of weeks before beautiful sweet fresh apples would be available in abundance.

These images of flooding and apples seem to be quite good symbols to summarise something of what today's readings present as we begin our Lenten journey this year.

The apple is perhaps an ambiguous symbol. In art and popular imagination, it has come to stand for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. For me then it serves as a reminder that the original perfection of God's creation and good role for humankind within it was broken through human rebellion.

The apple has become a hallmark of Satan the tempter's work. At the Fall, and also in the temptations faced by Jesus, the issue is that something God-given and good is

being turned to a use or towards an objective for which it was not intended. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not a bad thing in itself; but for human beings to have it is for them to usurp God's proper role in judging and determining what is good and what is not. In the more detailed accounts of the temptations of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, the specific things proposed by Satan are not necessarily bad as such – Jesus will go on to satisfy hunger, to offer up his life, and to take authority over all the nations of the world – but those things are not for now, and they are not to be employed in the service of Satan's whims or Jesus' personal needs or wants. At root, temptation is about the tempter wanting us to doubt the goodness and dependability of God.

What was true at the Fall and in the temptations of Jesus, is true also for us. And here the apple is a good metaphor for temptation, because apples are intended to be enjoyable and good for us. It is when they are eaten at the wrong time or in the wrong quantity, or acquired for wrong ends or hoarded, that they may not be good for us.

The rebellion of the Fall brought about devastating effect on creation. This is summarised in Genesis 3 in terms of the resulting effect for humankind: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you...". But Paul in Romans 8 makes it clear that the effects were not limited to these, describing it as "creation subjected to frustration." The wreckage wrought by last year's cyclone, affecting land and crops and homes and livelihoods, speaks to me deeply of creation's brokenness.

It was the reference to Noah of course that prompted my thinking about flooding. Peter references the days of Noah to make a key point about Jesus, although precisely what is intended in this reference is obscure and much debated.¹ Regardless of the background, the key point however is that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, won victory over sin and over all the powers of evil in its many different forms and wherever they're found in creation – whether earthly or

¹ For discussion on this see Grudem pp.157-162, and in detail at pp.203-239; and Clowney pp.155-168. Note also Wright's view briefly stated in *Early Christian Letters* p.81-83. I have chosen to gloss the distinctions, but am rather drawn to the view expressed in Wright.

spiritual forces. Jesus' proclamation to the imprisoned spirits is proclamation of his victory, his authority, his ultimate power over all these forces that would array themselves then or now against God's good purpose.

Perhaps then the fresh new apple can stand as a symbol of resurrection.

And, flooding then becomes the sign of our incorporation into the work of Jesus, his dying and rising; an incorporation into his victory. Of course this sign is not the flooding of Noah's day, nor of Cyclone Gabrielle. Rather it is the flooding of baptism.

The only thing I really recall about the first full immersion baptism I ever conducted was the look on seventeen-year-old Ben's face as I lowered him into the water and the water flooded over his face. It was a look of wide-eyed panic. It was just an instant, but it was very vivid. In his mind he absolutely knew what was really going on, but something deep and instinctive within him nevertheless recognised this immersion as carrying the risk of drowning.

Baptism is, among other things, a sacrament and symbol of dying and rising.

In baptism we declare our allegiance to Christ as we submit to becoming participants in his dying and rising. We go down into a watery grave and are counted dead to sin: the old life is behind us. This is our spiritual death.

Baptism is also participation in his rising again. We are drawn up from the water to receive the benefits of Jesus' risen life, as we start to live as free human beings, freed from the bondage of sin. This is our spiritual rising.

Our bodily death will, at the end of the age, be followed by our bodily rising again. It is at this time that all the fullness of the promise represented in baptism will be made real.

So that picture of the fresh new apple is not just for Jesus, but is for his people also. For we can look forward to our own resurrection at the end of the age, and with it restoration, new creation, new flourishing for humankind and all of creation.

But even as we rejoice in new apples a year on from Cyclone Gabrielle, we have to recognise that many people affected by the cyclone still suffer immensely. So we mustn't be glib. When Peter talks of suffering, he is writing to a young church persecuted for their faith in Christ. Peter encourages them to hold fast in their suffering, to not be discouraged, because they follow in the footsteps of Christ who suffered that we might share in his victory. Persecution is the work of evil acting against the goodness of God; and it is this evil that Jesus has won victory over. So this is different to the situation faced by those suffering as a result of the cyclone or another natural disaster; just as it is different to those who suffer through injury, or disease, or grief, or injustice, or as a result of someone's offending.

But I think there is a message here from Peter for all those in these situations too.

There are three points to make:

The first is that natural disasters, injury, disease - and even struggle and decline in the church – are products of the Fall just as much as persecution is an expression of it.

The second is to recall that Peter is not declaring that persecution's sufferings have ceased. Peter is describing salvation *through* or *in the midst* of the suffering of persecution, not salvation *from* suffering. The same, it seems to me, applies to other sources of suffering.

And the last point is that the effects of Jesus' victory over evil will, in the age to come, manifest in a restoration of all things, not just freedom from persecution – as Paul describes it in Romans 8: “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay.”

Through Christ we are saved through the flood of evil and death, to enjoy the fresh new apples of new creation. This is not to say that there won't be floods of all kinds in this life, nor that we won't face the temptation to misuse apples, but it gives us the true and ultimate perspective that enables us to endure these sufferings and to stand firm in Christ.

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