

THE APPLE TREE

Those of us who have been here during the last two hours have been thinking about what some of the trees mentioned in the Bible might say to us about Good Friday. When I started thinking about all this, the words of the 18th century carol ‘Jesus Christ the Apple Tree’ came to mind. Should that be one of my trees? But there was a problem. Apples don’t occur in the Bible. They are not a middle-eastern species. But hang on, you may be thinking, there is the apple that Adam and Eve ate in the Garden of Eden story. And isn't there a reference to apples in the Song of Solomon? Well, yes, both of those things might worth pursuing. But unfortunately Genesis doesn't mention an apple – it just talks about a fruit. In the Song of Solomon we read “As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” But Hebrew scholars now tell us that the word translated apple is obscure, and is more likely to mean ‘apricot’.

There was once a theory that the Genesis fruit became ‘apple’ because the Latin word for apple also means ‘evil’, But that doesn’t work in Hebrew. And indeed until the middle ages, the Genesis fruit was often thought of as a fig – after all it is from the fig tree that Adam and Eve sew clothes after they have eaten the fruit.

So we have to forget being literal, and just take what we can from myth, misunderstanding and mistranslation. We are used to the idea of Jesus as ‘the new Adam’ – “a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came” we sing in the hymn. So there is something to be said for picturing Jesus as the new apple which reverses the effect of the old one. Because what we say firmly on Good Friday is that what Jesus did in dying brings about the reconciliation of God and humankind. The first apple brought separation from God. This apple brings reunion. Jesus Christ the Apple Tree is a good way of expressing what he did and does for us.

And although the writer in the Song of Solomon may have talked about apricots, the overall picture of the lovers is a powerful reminder that the cross is the supreme way in which we see the love of God. As St John wrote: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.” And as we also sing in the hymn “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my souls, my life, my all.”

So the apple is not a Biblical fruit, but Jesus Christ the Apple Tree also serves our purpose today as, like that lover in the Song of Songs we delight to sit in his shadow. Those verses continue “he brought me to his banqueting house, and his intention towards me was love”. And here we come to the banquet which Jesus gave us – and receive the signs of that greatest of all loves in the bread of Communion.

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compared with Christ the Apple Tree.

His beauty doth all things excel,
By faith I know but ne'er can tell
The glory which I now can see,
In Jesus Christ the Appletree.

For happiness I long have sought,
And pleasure dearly I have bought;
I missed of all but now I see
'Tis found in Christ the Appletree.

I'm weary with my former toil -
Here I will sit and rest awhile,
Under the shadow I will be,
Of Jesus Christ the Appletree.

With great delight I'll make my stay,
There's none shall fright my soul away;
Among the sons of men I see
There's none like Christ the Appletree.

I'll sit and eat this fruit divine,
It cheers my heart like spirit'al wine;
And now this fruit is sweet to me,
That grows on Christ the Appletree.

This fruit doth make my soul to thrive,
It keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be
With Jesus Christ the Appletree.