

## Fruitful Argument

### Fermenting a good vintage

The familiar parable of the new and old wine is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is Luke's version:

"No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.' " (Luke 5:36-39)

The context of the parable shows us that Jesus told it in order to explain a new approach to fasting. But it has a wisdom that can be applied to many situations. Here in Chinley we have such a situation at the moment. New wine is bubbling away in the church: the young families amongst us have been thinking about new ways to introduce their children to Jesus and, for some time before the Covid crisis arose, they had begun experimenting with various ideas. Then Covid came, church services were closed, and we all discovered a new way of meeting; online. This has opened up new ways of getting together for discipleship groups, prayer meetings, family gatherings, general chat and, of course, it has functioned as an alternative to physical church services. With the end of the lockdown on the horizon, a number of people have begun to think about further developing these new approaches, even after we are allowed to "resume normal service".

So we have *new wine* here in Chinley and the PCC has opened a consultation inviting us all to contribute our thoughts about where we want the church to go as we come out of the pandemic.

When reading the parable of the new and old wine it is all too easy to identify with either the new wine or the old and in each case to dismiss the other. But I think that would be to miss its meaning. Jesus does not say that the old garments or the old wine should be thrown away. On the contrary, His point is that both are valuable and need preserving. Matthew says "both are preserved" (Matt 9: 17) and we are told in Luke's account that "The old is better".

Old wine and old clothes are valuable and need preserving. Any wine collector will say that the old wine is best. In terms of church, we could say, "familiar and well-tried patterns have the best flavour." We know what is going to happen and everything is well ordered and carefully balanced. These are good values.

But where do old clothes and old wine come from? They come from new clothes and new wine which has matured; this is the lesson of the parable. If we want to be able to keep enjoying comfortable old clothes and great tasting mature wine, we must create and preserve new clothes and make new wine, so that in time they can become mature in their own right. The old wine we have today will one day be replaced by the new wine which today is barely drinkable. That is how life works.

Jesus highlights certain contrasting qualities of old wine and new wine. Old wine tastes better, and new wine bursts old wineskins. But you can't get one without the other. So unless you give the new wine new wineskins you will never end up with mature wine.

In God's great wisdom He has given some people (usually, but by no means exclusively, the young) a peculiar liking for new, raw, bubbly wine. But even wine connoisseurs collect and preserve new wine so that it can become old wine –they just don't drink it while it's young! So, even if we don't like it ourselves, we all need to value and preserve the new wine.

Wherever we might put ourselves in this parable, then, – whether we are an adventurer thrilled by the rawness and uncertainty of experiment, or a connoisseur who loves the taste of the well matured vintage, I would like to encourage us to heed its wisdom. Let us value both the old and the new, and ensure that the new can develop and mature without constraint from the old – our future depends on it.

Stephen Dolley.

## Jesus loves a good argument

Consultation about church practices is a recipe for arguments and is not for the faint hearted! As we embark upon this consultation, disagreements will almost inevitably arise. I would like to offer some thoughts about how Jesus handled arguments in the hope that it might give us some encouragement.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels." (2 Tim 2:23)

This is sound advice, which we might take to mean that we should do all we can to avoid arguments. However, Paul did not tell Timothy to avoid arguments altogether – indeed Paul himself frequently engaged in long and intense argument. It is *foolish and stupid* arguments that he tells Timothy to avoid. The Gospels record that Jesus frequently engaged in argument; Jesus loved a good argument.

As we read the Gospels we discover that Jesus repeatedly provoked arguments. He started the argument in the synagogue in Nazareth which ended with the people trying to throw Him off the cliff (Luke 4). He frequently provoked arguments with the Pharisees over their hypocrisy. He provoked arguments with the lawyers at a dinner party (Luke 11:37-54). He provoked the chief priests in the temple by telling a parable against them (Matt 21:33-46). The story of the Good Samaritan was Jesus' response to a lawyer who wanted to test Him and justify himself (Luke 10:25-37).

Luke makes it clear that Jesus was willing to engage deeply in disputes, even with people whose only purpose was to try to make Him look foolish:

And as He said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to assail Him vehemently, and to **cross-examine** Him about many things, lying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him. (Luke 11:53-54)

So we can see that Jesus was not afraid of a good argument! Neither was He upset by arguments between His disciples. We are told of several arguments that broke out amongst the disciples and there is no suggestion that Jesus tried to shut these arguments down. Instead, we see Him using them as an opportunity to teach them (Luke 9:46-48, Mark 10:35-44, Luke 22:24-30).

The argument in Luke 22 is most tragic; it occurred during the Last Supper. At the very point where Jesus was laying down His own life as a ransom for theirs, they turned their attention to themselves and argued about who was the greatest! It is astonishing that Jesus didn't explode in outrage at such behaviour, but He didn't. John tells us how, instead, He washed their feet and taught them about serving one another.

Matthew records an argument that Jesus had with the Sadducees in which they come up with the hypothetical example of a woman who is widowed seven times by seven brothers one after the other, in an attempt to disprove the resurrection of the dead. Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." (Matt 22:23-32)

Why did Jesus bother to engage in this argument at all? He knew that the Sadducees were not going to change their minds about resurrection. They didn't ask Him because they wanted to learn but because they wanted to try to make Him look foolish. Isn't this just the sort of foolish argument Paul said we should avoid? Jesus could have said, "I'm not prepared to argue with you if you don't want to listen. Come back when you really want to learn something." But He didn't.

There is much that can be said about this particular argument but I want to highlight the following:

- Jesus chose to engage in the argument
- He listened to the logic of the argument
- He constructed a reasoned and logical reply
- Having replied, He then formulated a new logical argument for them to consider

Both the Sadducees and Jesus used logical reasoning in their arguments and the aim was to clarify a deeper truth. Although the scenario they discussed was hypothetical, its logical consequences had deep implications for the faith of those who were listening.

This is all a long-winded way of saying that we should not be afraid of a bit of argument between us. Even arguments where initially we may not be inclined to listen and consider change. Arguments last longer than the argument itself – they continue in our heads and in our hearts, and that is often where the Holy Spirit gets His opportunity to be heard - if we remember that the first command is to love one another and do not shut Him out by harbouring bitterness.

By His own example, Jesus teaches us that arguments are worth having – except the foolish and stupid ones that Paul warns against. So what makes an argument worthwhile? I suggest the following:

- The subject really matters
- People are willing to give reasoned arguments in support of their opinions
- People are willing to have their arguments cross-examined
- The outcome is greater clarity about what really matters

There is one final incident from Luke's gospel that I want to offer as instructive. It's not a heated argument, but we are told it was a reasoned and lengthy discussion. It is the discussion between the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-30). Luke specifically tells us that they reasoned together (the Greek word means to discuss, dispute or examine). They were trying to make sense of what they knew. The interesting thing about this is that they already knew enough to make sense of it. Before Jesus' crucifixion He had already told them what was going to happen, and why, but they had not understood or believed it. So now Jesus draws near and listens to their reasoning. Then He reprimands them for their slowness and unbelief and reasons with them using the scriptures they already know.

In a similar way, when we have our arguments and try to reason with each other, we need to try to remember that Jesus likes to join in. And if we listen for Jesus as we listen to each other, perhaps we will be reminded of things He has told us. When that happens our arguments can be transformed beyond the limitations of our own reason and our attempts to persuade one another, and they can become an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to speak and for us to help one another to believe what He has told us. That makes for a truly worthwhile argument.

In the famous passage on love, Paul tells us that love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1Cor 13:7). The command of Christ is that we love one another, and love *trusts*. That means that in our arguments we should start with the presumption that the other person is trust-worthy; that however strongly we may disagree, they are being honest and have good intentions. But God, in His wisdom has not yet made us perfect, so sometimes we hurt each other in the course of our arguments. When this happens we need to "Bear with each other and forgive one another" (Col 3:13). But until Jesus returns He wants us to have our arguments and do our best to reason with one another and to persuade one another with love and respect as we walk the road with Him.

Stephen Dolley.