

Let me tell you a story, which has encouraged me these last few months, and has many more layers to explore as this ministry unfolds.

When I came here for my interview for the position of Dean of this cathedral, on 26th May, the day began with a tour of the cathedral, and deanery. I must say, from the time I was invited to consider the position, Nikolai and I have both been excited, with a strong and growing, "yes" at the core of our being.

Now, I need to tell you about what happened the week before that interview day, when I was in Perth for the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction Conference, with speaker, Belden Lane. On the first day of the conference, Belden spoke of the word of God in scripture and the word of God in nature.

He invited us to find a teacher in nature, a tree, which might speak to us of God. I wandered round the site, and was drawn to a pomegranate tree, not really a tree at all, more a shrub. The Pomegranate tree was covered in ripe and ripening fruit. It was amazing! I tasted some of the fruit. It was moist and rich, sweet and slightly tart. I sat back and observed the tree. I realised it was a very ordinary, spindly tree, a bush I might not even have noticed, if not for her fruit. It spoke to me of fruitfulness, and Jesus calling to bear fruit, the fruit of my relationship with God. It also spoke of overflowing generous hospitality, with seeds spilling in abundance, and it spoke of community, the seeds grow together in the fruit. It is okay to be ordinary, to be everyday, but with God, the results can be surprising!

A week later, instead of going to the Canberra Goulburn Clergy Conference where I was supposed to be speaking, I was in Sale, at this cathedral. Nikolai and I wandered in and were met and welcomed by the lay chaplains. As we walked up towards the altar rails, you'll never guess what we saw! Baskets of pomegranates! I've never seen pomegranates in church before, have you? Pomegranates, which I understand were used at the Pentecost service! Fruits of the Spirit.. my jaw dropped.

A little while later, I was ushered into a room at Bishops Court to wait for my interview. I stood up and looked out the window, and there was a... pomegranate tree!! I was astounded!

The following week, I was leading a retreat for Uniting Church Civil Chaplains at Kincumber near Newcastle in NSW. I don't know that I was at my best, because, I was waiting to hear the result of my interview. I had been told I would hear by Tuesday, and had heard nothing! It was torture. My mind reviewed all the possibilities, maybe I didn't get the job, how could I be so wrong? I prayed, until I came to the point of acceptance of whatever the outcome would be. I laid it all in God's hands, yet again.

Wednesday was the last day of the retreat. One of the chaplains was to lead morning prayer, and beforehand, she said to me, "Is it okay if I light a pomegranate candle?" "Beg your pardon," I said. "A pomegranate tealight candle," she said. I didn't even know there were such things! "Sure," I said, a bit shaken..

On the way home to Canberra, about an hour and a half from home, I checked my emails on my mobile phone, and there was a letter from Bishop Kay offering me the job! I was so relieved, and excited..

When I got home, I googled pomegranate, as you do, and discovered its rich symbolism in the Christian as well as other religious traditions.

Pomegranates figure in many religious paintings by the likes of Botticelli and da Vinci, often in the hands of the Virgin Mary or the infant Jesus, and also on vestments, and in buildings. The fruit, broken or bursting open, is a symbol of the fullness of Jesus' suffering and resurrection, of fruitfulness in Christ. It is the colour of love, but notice that only in breaking open are the seeds spilled.. My friend Leo has painted me a Pomegranate Icon for my office..

Now, I wait to see the further unfolding of this symbol, and of the giftedness of this place, St Paul's Cathedral, Sale. I believe that together, we will bear much fruit, fruit that will abide, fruit built on the faithful ministry in this place of many many people over many many years.

I expect juiciness, I expect prayer, colour, beauty, intuition. I expect sweetness, and some tartness. I expect a flowering of the fruits of the spirit in this place. I expect faith, hope and love to flourish, in good times and in bad as we abide in God's love, with joy welling up in our hearts, loving one another as we have been loved by the one who is always loving, always faithful.

As Michael Leunig says,

Love is born

With a dark and troubled face

When hope is dead

And in the most unlikely place

Love is born:

Love is always born.

I come as beloved companion of God, following the command to love. I look forward to seeing love being born again, here, today, the love which is the gift of relationship with the Christ.

Susanna

From my sermon, 3 September 2016