



A Jar of Perfect Love

I have always assumed Jesus to be tall. Perhaps that is because of my lesser physical stature and years of learning to be 'small' in the presence of God. There are humbling moments when I sit in his office and he comes across to stand by me. They may be a time of judgement or of blessing - or both. On one such occasion I watched with him, the Bible scene in which, after his resurrection he came to his friends in Jerusalem. He breathed on them as he said, '*receive the Holy Spirit*'. And now he breathes on us! The 'breath' is his influence of divine love - the most wonderfully contagious breath in the universe. It is so easy to receive it with a willing response and a simple, child-like prayer - '*me too*'.

It was by this thought of his 'breathing' that he helped me to understand a little about Christian perfection. The subject has been so misunderstood and confused. Volumes of words have flowed in theological attempts to encapsulate an experience, only to raise even

more questions. I understand that perfect love is the multifaceted experience of the love of God in women and men making for a Christ-like way of life. Through the years I have loved to read the stories and experiences of a host of Christian saints. Reflecting in his office it realised how much I have been influenced by the writing and work of three Teresas - Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux and Teresa of Calcutta. All three possessed a saintliness in their mysticism, humility and service of the poor, yet all have reflected powerful images of Christ-like love. In them I was shown much more of Jesus.

There have been many others too who have obviously known the breath of Jesus' Spirit and reflected his likeness in their lives. Their testimony has variously provided me with encouragement, reproof and guidance all of which I have been grateful for. However, as years have passed and I have looked deeper than the glossy pages of biography, I learn not all the saintly followers of Jesus were 'perfect'. In fact, it seems some of them could be most difficult to live with. Knowing that has been good. I have then been able to take another look at people I have come into contact with whom, because I know their weaknesses and human oddities, I would be reluctant to call 'saints'. Now I know they were. They were people on whom Jesus had breathed. People who have lived under the influence of his Spirit.

They were far from perfect in every way, but in varied measure they contained that loving perfection which is evident in all who share life with Jesus! He brought to my mind the words of the apostle Paul. He spoke of Christians as being like common clay pots. Paul is mostly thought of as a great thinker, theologian, and missionary pioneer with a very serious view of life, as indeed he was, but in the Bible window I saw him smile - or was it a grin - as he stood by a potter's wheel and looked at his companions. He would write to friends at Corinth and tell them they were like common, everyday household clay pots. Not like the expensive Greek and Roman glazed ornamental versions, covered with intricate patterns. The beauty of the common pot was not so much in its graceful curves as in what it would contain. Similarly, the purpose of the Christian life is not the outward appearance - although that helps - it is the measure of God's love in that life. What made Christians different from other people was, and is, divine love filling them in measures suited to their unique personalities.

The world window opened for me on the life of one of those Christ-breathed persons. I saw Hannah knitting by the stove in her farmhouse kitchen. Her hands moved slowly, fingers stiff from years of manual work in all weathers on the farm and around the house.

Hannah was one of those 'saints' who by her life attracted human need to herself and her home. Faithfully supporting her children and a husband who was more at home at The Swan Inn than in his own milking-parlour, there was barely a time when she was not looking after a sick relative or calling on family and friends. When her health declined and friends expressed concern for her she had one stock answer. It came as a regular refrain - *'It's for the Lord. I'm leaving it in his hands.'* At Hannah's funeral service, her children requested we read the love passage from Paul's letter to Christians at Corinthians [1 Corinthians 13]. While the words were being spoken, several members of the congregation were nodding agreement as they remembered what Hannah had meant to them *Love is patient and kind ... love is not selfish ... love thinks of others ... love is forgiving .. love never gives up ... faith, hope and love are constant and the greatest of these is love.* Like God's love in Hannah. Close family readily forgot the cross words, Hannah's occasional impatience, her stern rebukes. That was the 'clay pot'. We were remembering the contents. What was most recalled that day was her love, and how her life had held a measure of the perfect love of Jesus, not for herself, but to share with others. The evidence of a holy, or love-filled life is not that it always shines as a light but that it gives refreshment to others. That was Hannah!

I shall continue to see the Director as a tall man. It reminds me who he is - and who I am. It keeps me in the lower place where he can breathe on me and, wonder of wonders, I can know what it is to contain his perfect love - just a little in a small clay jar!