

Stott week 3 – Maturity

It's a strange word maturity – it can mean different things for different objects – how long does it take a good red wine to mature and under what conditions? Apparently Germany's Historical Museum of the Palatinate has housed the world's oldest unopened bottle of wine, bottled around 100 years ago. But a century is nothing to the Speyer wine bottle, also known as the Römerwein aus Speyer. Its murky contents have sat undisturbed inside clear glass for 1,693 years.

The 1.5 litre bottle has handles shaped like dolphins and was buried in the tomb of a Roman nobleman and noblewoman near today's city of Speyer. Researchers estimate that it dates to around 325 AD. When the tomb was excavated in 1867, other wine bottles were found, long since shattered or empty. In earlier eras, Romans cremated the dead. But by the time of the Speyer bottle, Romans laid corpses to rest in sarcophagi with grave goods, which included everyday items, including wine.

The wine inside the Speyer bottle was likely made from local grapes that were planted during Roman rule. Unknown herbs were added as well, perhaps as flavouring or as a preservative. The residue inside, however, is no longer truly wine. Instead, it consists of a solid, dark mass and a milky liquid. Even the survival of that residue is unprecedented. An unusually well-made bottle that stayed airtight over the millennia, a wax seal, and a thick layer of olive oil preserved its contents from totally evaporating. In fact, more oil than wine was poured into the bottle, creating the dense, solid layer visible through the glass.

So, could you drink what's left?

On a microbiological level, yes: Researchers say it's likely safe and won't kill you, although the wine won't taste good. But you'd first have to wrestle the wine away from the museum, where staff refuse to open the bottle, even for research. According to a local news report, most of the museum staff is too afraid to handle the bottle. It's hard to say which would be scarier: dropping the world's oldest bottle of wine, or actually drinking it. Not sure I'd want to try!

You've probably heard the expression 'act your age, not your shoe size' – today we look at what Christian maturity looks like – and how we measure up to it.

We're in chapter 3 of John Stott's book 'the radical disciple'. Stott begins the chapter with a review of the state of the church worldwide. While we rejoice in amazing growth in places like China, 100fold growth since the middle of the 20th century, and more Christians there than all western countries put together. Yet there is no room for triumphalism, as often this is growth without depth. There is superficiality of discipleship everywhere, with huge problems of a lack of godliness and integrity. The same might be said of Africa – while many come to faith, there is a lack of biblical knowledge or good leadership. All these are the views of Christian leaders in the majority world. This issue is nothing new. Reflecting on the churches he himself brought into existence, Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, for instance – 'brothers and sisters, I could not address you as spiritual, but as worldly. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere human beings?' 1 Cor 3:1-3.

One key passage from Paul is important when we seek what it is to be mature. Reflecting on his own leadership to the Christians in Colossae, he writes 'We proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone as mature (teleos) in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me' (col 1:28-29)

That word 'mature' (teleos) Paul uses 19 times, often translated 'perfect', yet it rarely means this in an absolute sense, but instead maturity is contrasted against childishness.

So what is Christian maturity? It's hard to pin down – to use the phrase first coined by Conan Doyle and found on the lips of Sherlock Holmes in the Hounds of the Baskervilles – you'll know it when you see it.

Most of us suffer from lingering immaturities – even in the grown adult the little child is lurking there – how many times, for instance, do you find yourself thinking or saying 'it's not fair' or on a long journey 'are we there yet?'

And there are different types of maturity – there's physical, intellectual, moral and emotional – all those are true for all humanity, but for us as Christians, there's spiritual maturity too. What is that? Paul calls this maturity 'in Christ' – that is, having a mature relationship with Jesus.

We are in Christ – not like our clothes are in a wardrobe, but rather as the branches are 'in' the vine and our limbs are 'in' the body – in other words, we are united to Christ. So to be in Christ is to be personally, vitally, organically related to him, and this affects our worship, love, trust and obedience to and in him.

To paraphrase Jim Packer – we are small Christians because we have a small Christ. The truth is, there are many Jesuses on offer in the religious supermarkets of the world, and many of them fall far short of what we see in the bible - they are caricatures of the authentic Jesus.

We might find, for example Jesus the socialist, and Jesus the capitalist; Jesus the glutton or the aesthetic Jesus. There is the clown of Godspell and Jesus Christ the superstar. Each of these is what St Paul calls 'another Jesus'.

So to develop true Christian maturity, we need a fresh, biblical vision of Jesus, not least in his absolute supremacy which we find in Col 1:15-20 – 'Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.'

This is the real Jesus, the one Paul proclaimed as Christ the Lord. Lord of Creation and Lord of the Church. We should rightly be on our knees worshipping this Jesus. As Stott powerfully writes 'away then with our petty, puny Jesus. Away with our Jesus clowns and pop stars! Away too with our political Messiahs and revolutionaries! For these are caricatures. If this is how we think of him, then no wonder our immaturity persists!'

Where then do we find the authentic Jesus – the answer is in the bible – there we find the Father's portrait of the Son painted by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is full of Christ. Jesus, in John 5:39, referring to the Old Testament says the scriptures testify about himself. Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ – more positively, knowledge of scripture is knowledge of Christ. If we see Christ as scripture sees him, then our wholehearted allegiance, faith, love and obedience would be drawn out of us and we would take steps towards maturity. Nothing is more important for mature Christian discipleship than a fresh, clear, true vision of the authentic Jesus.

Who is called to be mature? Paul is clear -everyone! Col 1:28 'Christ is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching **everyone** with all wisdom, so that we may present **everyone** fully mature in Christ.'

Everyone! The background to this is that in Paul's day there was a group who believed that there were first and second class Christians – on the one hand there was the 'hoi polloi' the common people, who had faith, yes, but not true knowledge, which the first class Christians had.

No, says Paul, spiritual maturity is available for all. Nobody needs to fail to attain to it. Again, the poorer our vision of Christ, the poorer our discipleship will be, and the richer our vision of Christ, the richer our discipleship will be.

As a Christian leader, I have particular responsibility, like Paul, to seek Christian maturity for you all. That's why preaching and teaching is so close to my heart. Yet we each have a responsibility for our own maturity, spending time praying, reading God's word and worshipping together, and I invite you to see that fresh, biblical vision of Jesus, one who is worthy of our worship and our obedience.

Amen.