

Tale from the Garden!

This week we're thinking about looking for the extraordinary in the ordinary – & the plant kingdom is certainly full of astonishing & peculiar examples. When you think of plants, you usually think of the 'ordinary' greenery around your homes and the foods you eat. In fact, there are 301,000 species that are currently known about & people eat only 20,000 of them! Species are being discovered all the time & the list is growing every day! The plant kingdom is filled with so many interesting varieties and facts that will surprise, amaze and entertain you. Did you know ... an average size tree can provide enough wood to make 170,100 pencils!

But the amazing world of plants consists of so much more:

Plants are natural pharmaceutical chemists ...

Did you know that the precursor of aspirin was originally derived from the perennial herb meadowsweet? People have been using plant extracts as medicine since antiquity, and the discoveries keep rolling in.

Plant are masters of camouflage ...

You know what isn't usually the target of herbivores? Rocks. To avoid being eaten, some members of the Aizoaceae family of succulent plants have evolved to look like rocks and pebbles. These 'living stones' are native to southern Africa.

Plants can get impressively old ...

I'm talking really old! The Tumboa is a large desert plant. It grows in the Namib Desert in Namibia & southern Angola. The plant can live up to 2,000 years. The Tumboa is considered a "living fossil" because no other plant that still exists is closely related to it. The scientific name for the Tumboa is *Welwitschia mirabilis*. *Mirabilis* means "miraculous." The Tumboa plant has a strong, woody stem, which can be as large as 13 feet (4m) around. Two leathery leaves grow on opposite sides of the plant from the base of the stem. They are never shed, and they can reach a length of nearly 10 feet (3m)! Tumboa plants usually grow in dry riverbeds. They are never found more than about 100 miles (160 km) from the seacoast. The plant collects water from fog and dense coastal mist. It also has a deep root that uses moisture from the soil. The Tumboa takes its scientific name from Friedrich Welwitsch, an Austrian plant scientist. Welwitsch first saw the plant in about 1860 near Cabo Negro in southern Angola. The Tumboa is now protected by law, to stop people from cutting down the plants for firewood.

But *Welwitschia* are just youngsters compared to some Great Basin Bristlecone Pines. These gnarly old timers are found in the high deserts of the California White Mountains, and the oldest recorded living individual is a staggering 5066 years old! This tree would have germinated sometime around when Sumerians (the Sumerians were the people of southern Mesopotamia whose civilization flourished between c. 4100-1750 BC) first started using cuneiform, meaning it has been alive for pretty much all of recorded human history. The exact location of this tree, as well as those of several other ancient Bristlecones, are actually kept secret to protect them.

Plants give off a smell for a reason ...

Would a rose by any other name not smell as sweet? Well roses and many other flowers do have a smell we and many pollinators like bees find attractive, but not all flowers are so pleasant. In fact, some are quite revolting. The aptly named "corpse flower", or titan arum, smells like it sounds - like rotting meat! Many plants use this strategy to attract insect pollinators that would find decaying flesh attractive, such as flies and carrion beetles. In addition to its notable 'fragrance', the titan arum also boasts the largest unbranched flower in the plant kingdom.

And did you know ... the smell of freshly cut grass is actually a plant distress call! Not surprising!

Plants make the best of tough times ...

One of the downsides of being a plant is that it's hard to get away when things turn nasty – they can't just pack up & go, to escape a wildfire. However, as with many such extreme situations, plants have adapted. In regions where wildfires are common some hardy plants have even come to benefit from fire. For example, the Longleaf Pine of the south-eastern United States spends its early life in a short "grass stage" that is very tolerant of fire. The tightly packed needles protect the bud, and when the time is right, it goes through a growth spurt. Longleaf Pines tend to form large open savannahs, tolerating surface fires where other species can't take the heat. Other pine species, like the Aleppo pine of the Mediterranean, need a good roasting to get going - hot fires actually promote their seed germination!

Plants can come back from the dead ...

Well, not exactly, but some of them can make a comeback from looking dead. A group of plant commonly referred to as “resurrection plants” can experience almost complete dryness and then rebound when watered again, sometimes even after weeks or months of drought. One such resurrection plant is the Rose of Jericho, a native of the Chihuahuan Desert in the southern U.S. and northern Mexico.

Plants can hunt ...

I’m not talking about carnivorous plants like the venus fly trap - I’m talking about plants hunting other plants. Parasitic plants like Dodder can sense the chemicals given off by their targets and home in, growing spidery tendrils that eventually latch onto their prey! Once they take hold, these parasites leech nutrients from their hosts. While the nature of this interaction is fascinating to scientists, it is a headache for farmers. Dodder preys on many agricultural crops and is extremely difficult to eradicate from a field.

Plants make the oxygen we breathe & the food we eat ...

These green machines use sunlight to synthesize nutrients from carbon dioxide and water & then generate oxygen as a by-product (which is vitally important for us!). Converting solar energy into calories also puts plants at the foundation of the Earth’s food chains. But did you know ... 90% of the foods humans eat come from just 30 plants!

So, what can we learn from these extraordinary plants ...

- ✓ We can be the ‘medicine’ that will heal the hurt others are going through. “A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down” is probably the most popular song from the Disney film ‘Mary Poppins’ & broadly speaking it can be interpreted as meaning that something good makes something bad more tolerable. When things that are hard to swallow (both physical things and experiences), they can be digested more easily if they are eased along with something comforting or “sweet” – a kind word, a comforting gesture – we can do that!
- ✓ As Christians in the world, we often try to hide our faith out of fear - but God has given us his Holy Spirit to overcome our fears and be bold witnesses in this world. Camouflage is used to avoid being a victim. This is most seen in nature. A fish looks like a rock instead of a meal. A chameleon changes colours to match his environment to avoid being seen. Do we camouflage our faith in order to fit in? To avoid being a victim? It’s simply easier to live in this world if you are not radically different. We are timid instead of bold. In 2 Timothy 1 v7 we read: “For God has NOT given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.” The Lord wants to encourage us today to put away the camouflage and fear not – he will provide! That is the example that Paul is giving us – be bold soldiers clearly identified in this world. We don’t need to be camouflaged because we have a spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline which can overcome the world. Let’s be bold servants of Christ! We can do that!
- ✓ We might not live up to 2000 years but growing old is a fact of life. There are those who try very hard to preserve their youth & there are those who fear the years ticking by ... but there is a bright side to growing old. If you don’t think there is a bright side to it, I found a humorous story (one among many!) that might change your mind. When Mary’s grandson asked her how old she was, she teasingly replied, “I’m not sure.” Undaunted by his grandmother’s ignorance, the little boy gave her some advice. He said, “Look in your underwear, Grandma. Mine says I’m four.” Growing old is the inevitable onward march of moments and years without the possibility of going back, a march that, even while on the uphill side of life, is leading to the downhill side. It casts an autumn-like shadow over many a birthday. Nevertheless, the Bible gives us the bright side of everything! By focussing on the word of God, every year means another year of experiencing His love and faithfulness, and it means that we have more knowledge of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The second bright side to growing older is that growing older brings increasing fruitfulness. Psalms 92 v14 tells us that ‘They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green ...’ In other words, when we live in daily fellowship with the Lord, we will draw strength and sustenance from Him. Age does not impair our fruit-bearing capabilities. Just as each season of nature has its beauty and purpose by God’s design, so there is no season of life in which the Christian should be disappointed at living. Though opportunities and abilities may

decline with age, each day of life that God gives us is purposefully ordained according to His perfect wisdom. We can bear fruit ... we can do that!

- ✓ Take Time to Smell the Roses ... In Ecclesiastes 3 v1 we read “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” We’re a part of nature so why are we always in such a hurry? “Hurry up, I’ve got places to go, and things to do, and people to see.” We do have places to go, and we do have things to do. But life shouldn’t be lived in a hurry. You know the old saying, “haste makes waste”? We’re told in Proverbs 19 v2 ‘It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty & miss the way.’ We need to slow down a bit. We need to consider God’s word more often. So then, slow down and ‘smell the roses’, and enjoy being a Christian. We need to allow “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” to “guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4 v7) It’s much better to slow down & relax with God, than to get too hasty without Him – we can do that!
- ✓ Tough Times – we’ve certainly had plenty of those over the past few years. BUT God, His Word, and the Good News of the Gospel are unchanging, the same today, yesterday, and forever. However, we must “embrace” change. We must adapt, adjust and change. We are instructed to be transformed and changed into the likeness and image of Christ. In Romans 12 v2 the Lord directs us: ‘Do not conform any longer to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ The Lord also says in Isaiah 43 v19: ‘See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland ...’. Every people, tribe, tongue, and nation has been impacted by the global pandemic. We were already faced with many challenges and difficulties in life and ministry before this pandemic & now we are most definitely in a “new normal,” a “restart,” a “refresh.” So, where are you in it? Are you embracing change or resisting it? Do you welcome it or run from it? Are you looking for the new ways God has for you to serve and carry out His Kingdom work? How are you adapting, adjusting, and changing? We simply must continue to look to Him and allow His Holy Spirit to lead us. The Lord will lead us to new ways of sharing and spreading the Gospel if we are willing to adapt, adjust and change. We can do that!
- ✓ Everyone loves a good comeback story. It's thrilling to see someone go from being on the verge of defeat to clawing their way back into it and then achieve the impossible comeback. We love to see people rise above adversity and triumph. Many consider Abe Lincoln to be the greatest American President. He grew up poor, failed at business twice and had a nervous breakdown. He lost when he ran for Congress, lost twice when he ran for the Senate and lost as a vice presidential candidate. One might think he should look for a new career! But he pressed on and made an amazing comeback. He was elected the 16th President, led the country to reconciliation and won re-election. Then there was the greatest individual comeback of them all - the resurrection of Jesus. There were three elements that were needed in each comeback story: 1) The moment when you think it's over. 2) The moment you start to believe. 3) When the victory happens and the celebration begins. There are times when we find ourselves in a trying situation that isn't our fault; it's the circumstances of life. Then there are the times when it is our fault; we make poor choices. When we are suffering from the consequences of our actions we are left with regrets and sorrow. This can be the time when we lose hope; where we convince ourselves it will never get any better. This is the fearful moment, the doom and gloom moment where you wonder if you can make it any further. Your burden is heavy; your outlook is dim. You are led to the place where you think the game is over. Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15 v34a, "Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning." How many times has God communicated that to us? The light bulb moment! This is the moment of believing in possibilities. It might not be an easy road but if we stay on it long enough, knowing that our God is our Rock, compassionate & loving, we will be able to celebrate being restored, renewed & reborn. We can do that!
- ✓ The interaction plants have with each other, parasite or mutual, reminds us that God designed us to live in community with others and to work in partnership with one another for the sake of the kingdom. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. We are the body of Christ and we need each other! Our need for unity and encouragement from one another is reflected in the passage from 1 Corinthians 12 v12–27: One Body, Many Parts. ‘Now you are the body of

Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.' (v27) Following the years of Pandemic lockdowns & restrictions, now, more than ever, we need to remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We each play a vital role in God's kingdom. Each one of us is significant in our own right, chosen and loved by God. I love the graphic picture Paul paints for us in this passage – imagine a foot saying that it can't be part of the body because it isn't a hand! And yet, so often, we can disqualify ourselves using the very same logic. Remember: God never disqualifies us. Each of us fulfils a particular purpose that God has created, and uniquely equipped, us for. Without us, the body would be lacking. The Church is an amazing reflection of God's grace and creativity. As individuals we should be proud and honoured to be part of God's body. We really need to appreciate all the gifts each one of us brings. We need to love each other, be excited about our service together, be hopeful and empathetic when someone suffers, and we need to pray together. All of those things make our body, our church, stronger. We can do that!

- ✓ Finally, just as the plants are crucial members of Earth's Food Chain, equally Jesus is our Bread of Life. Despite modern concerns of gluten-free & other diets, bread has historically been a nutrition staple, and continues to provide energy and life to those who eat it! Jesus called Himself the "bread of life", and we recognize that we need Him for fuel and nourishment in our faith lives, just as we need physical food for our bodies. Obviously, our stomachs are going to get hungry. We still need to take in food. But Jesus was referring to something more than that. He was talking about satisfying a soul hunger. We have spiritual needs for things that can't be taken care of with food or other material items. Whether we recognize it or not, we have a craving that only Christ can fulfil. Jesus is essential to all things. You can't have life without Him, any more than you can make a sandwich without bread! Jesus provides all that we need! He promises daily bread, gives His body and blood for us, and promises to sustain us in all aspects of body and life. It can be easy to grow distracted by our material or physical needs, but we know that life is so much more. We need to be spiritually nourished in order to grow in our faith and to serve other people. So how do we do that? How can we "consume" the blessings of Jesus? We pray; we read His Word; we recognize that He is present with us always. We can also remember and celebrate our salvation when we go to church and worship with other believers. We can do that!

**THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY – THAT'S US!
IN OUR 'ORDINARY' LIVES, LET'S DO 'EXTRAORDINARY' THINGS!**

AMEN



Meadowsweet



The Mighty 'Corpse' Plant