

Tale from the Garden!

Climbing honeysuckles (*Lonicera*) are a classic climber for a romantic cottage garden. Twining around pergolas and adorning walls, they are covered in clusters of tubular flowers in the height of the summer. Everyone recognizes the lovely fragrance of a honeysuckle plant and the sweet taste of its nectar. A honeysuckle plant is a great addition to any landscape and will draw abundant wildlife with its sweet, yellow to bright-red blossoms.

The sweet, heady scent of Honeysuckle, carried on a warm summer breeze, is one of the most delightful experiences of the season. Strongest at night, in order to attract pollinating moths, this scent is a happy addition to any garden. Honeysuckle is a climbing plant, common in hedgerows, scrub and woodlands, where it twines itself clockwise around the branches and stems of other shrubs and trees. Whorls of trumpet-shaped flowers appear from June to August and clusters of red berries ripen in the autumn.



This trumpet-like flower is a paradise for wildlife, with its sweet, heady fragrance calling to nearby species, particularly on warm summer evenings.

Honeysuckle is a true wildlife 'hotel': its nectar-rich, scented flowers attract moths like the impressive Elephant Hawk-moth which are, in turn, preyed upon by bats; new shoots attract blackfly which bring hungry Blue Tits, Lacewings and Ladybirds; its climbing stems provide nest sites and material for birds, such as Blackbirds and Pied Flycatchers; small mammals like Dormice use the honeysuckle bark to build nests for their summer young & eat the sweet, nectar-rich flowers as a source of energy; and its juicy red berries are eaten by everyone from Song Thrushes to squirrels.

Honeysuckle is hugely valuable to wildlife, supporting several species, many of which are rare.

Butterflies, such as the white admiral (which is in decline), rely specifically on honeysuckle, and it is also prized by bumblebees. Pollinating moths are attracted to the sweet scent of honeysuckle at night, when it is strongest; and birds, including thrushes, warblers and bullfinches, eat the berries when they ripen in late summer and autumn.

Other names for honeysuckle include Irish vine, woodbine, fairy trumpets, honeybind, trumpet flowers, goats leaf and sweet suckle. The old name Woodbine describes the twisting, binding nature of the honeysuckle through the hedgerows.

Uses of honeysuckle

Honeysuckle has been used to make beautiful walking sticks which were once popular with Scots music hall performers. They were created as the honeysuckle entwined itself around branches, causing the branches themselves to become twisted.

The dried flowers are used for adding to pot-pourri, herb pillows and floral waters. Also, scented cosmetics are made from the fresh flowers.

Honeysuckle is edible and contains calcium, magnesium and potassium. Children learned long ago to remove a flower from the vine and pull the stem at the small end. The whole inside part of the flower will come out from the petals. They would suck on the long skinny tubes, which tasted sweet, almost like honey. In the past, honeysuckle vines were often boiled and eaten like a vegetable. Flowers were boiled into syrups or placed in puddings.

Medicinal History

While the berries are poisonous, the leaves, flowers and seeds have been used for medicinal purposes for a variety of conditions.

The ancient Chinese used honeysuckle for snake bites. Physicians in Middle Age Europe found that honeysuckle was antibacterial, antispasmodic and anti-inflammatory. Stems have been eaten since the

Middle Ages for arthritis, mumps, hepatitis, upper respiratory infections and pneumonia and were used to treat dysentery. The flowers were commonly used to cure skin diseases, tumors, rashes and sores from the Middle Ages all the way up to the late 1800s.

Folklore

It was believed that if honeysuckle grew around the entrance to the home it prevented a witch from entering. In other places it's believed that grown around the doors it will bring good luck & if brought into the house will bring with it great wealth! If it grows well in your garden, then you will be protected from evil. In Ireland honeysuckle was believed to have a power against bad spirits, and it was used in a drink to cure the effects of the evil eye.

Honeysuckle is the symbol of love. In the language of flowers it stands for the bond of love, devoted love and fidelity, probably because of the Greek legend of Daphnis and Chloe. In Greek mythology Daphnis and Chloe were lovers, but they lived far apart and only could see each other while the honeysuckle bloomed. Daphnis asked the god of love if the plant could bloom longer than a season, so they could be together longer, which is why, according to legend, honeysuckle blooms continually throughout warm weather periods.

Those who wear honeysuckle flowers are said to be able to dream of their true love. Its clinging nature in the language of flowers symbolises, 'we are united in love,' and emphasis's the bond of devotion and affection between two people. It was also believed that if the blooms were brought into the house then a wedding would follow within a year.

In the Victorian era there was a ban on young girls bringing honeysuckle into the home because the heady fragrance of the flowers was believed to cause dreams that were far too risqué for their sensibilities!

Famous Painting



In the 1600's Paul Rubens, a Baroque painter, created a painting called the Honeysuckle Bower. It was in honour of his marriage to Isabella Brant. In the painting the pair sit together in a bower surrounded by honeysuckle as a symbol of undying love.

Shakespeare - Midsummer Nights' Dream

Shakespeare pays great attention to the honeysuckle or woodbine as it was then called. In Act 2 - he says the following:-

"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine:
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight."

What a beautiful image!

So ... if the Honeysuckle is the perfect wildlife 'hotel', how much more is the Church a home for guests & strangers. How would you react to someone who said they were an evangelist and God had told them to stay at your house? In today's world, 'Of course' may not be the first or most obvious response that comes to mind! However, when Jesus sent out his disciples on their missionary activities, he knew the Hebrew (Old Testament) tradition of showing hospitality to the stranger or foreigner. And it is a practice that, as the New Testament shows, remains firmly within the Christian tradition too. How, then, should we respond to strangers? Do we take the issue of hospitality as seriously as Scripture encourages us to do? And if not, why not? Do we need to pray for a spirit of generosity and warmth towards those seeking the love and help that only Jesus can provide?

Some people love to travel. I like going on journeys but I always love coming home! Travelling requires us to have to rely on other people's hospitality. And that can be scary.

One thing that I'm bad at with travelling is I always end up packing waaaay too much stuff because of trying to anticipate the "what ifs" of travelling. I try to anticipate what kind of hospitality I'll be offered. Hospitality can make the difference between a relaxing trip and an exhausting, homesick grind.

As important as hospitality can be for people in our time when we travel, it was a necessary practice in the ancient world. There weren't hotels. Inns were scarce, and they often weren't in the kinds of places that God-fearing people would want to stay. For people to even survive their travels, they had to put their lives in the hands of people that they did not know, trusting that those people would take care of them.

Hospitality is important to the writers of the Bible. Time and time again, the people who show hospitality are the heroes of the story, and the people who fail to show hospitality are the villains. Hospitality is encouraged throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, for instance: Leviticus (19 v33-34) says "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt."

In Hebrews (13 v2) we hear "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

It would seem that hospitality is important to God.

So maybe that's why, in our Gospel story today, Jesus sends out the Twelve in pairs and expressly forbids them from over-packing. Jesus adds "Whenever you enter a house stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them."

Let's just take a moment to imagine ... It's a hot, dusty day in the ancient Near East. You're walking home from work, when two men without any belongings or shoes approach you looking for a place to stay. I think most of us would wish we'd taken the long way home and avoided them! But what an incredible gift they are offering their hosts. We learn later in this passage that the people that take in these 12 disciples would have witnessed preaching, miraculous healings & exorcisms. They would have seen, first-hand, a fresh perception of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God isn't just a place that we go to in the blessed afterlife. The kingdom of God is what it looks like when things are "on earth, as they are in heaven." It's something that is happening now, but also a place where we will be swept up into in the future.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that the kingdom of God is "God's dream for the world." The kingdom of God is a place where the things that normally separate us are rendered unimportant. It's happening anywhere where the barriers that divide us crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease. It's any time in which, & any place where, all can live in justice and peace. It's the place where God is still creating, still redeeming, and still, in God's time, putting the world right.

When people ask Jesus about this kingdom, Jesus usually answers in parables. "It's like a son that took half of his father's estate and squandered it. He comes back destitute and expecting his father to hate him, but instead his father has been waiting and watching for him the whole time and runs to him, kisses him and throws him a giant party." "It's like a woman who loses a very valuable coin, so she turns her whole house upside down, and when she finally finds it, she invites the whole neighbourhood over to celebrate!"

Isn't it interesting that the way Jesus describes the kingdom of God makes it seem particularly present in encounters that involve both vulnerability and hospitality?

Of course, in our Gospel today, when Jesus sends the 12 out, he warns them that not everyone will welcome them. Do you ever wonder about the people who rejected Jesus by turning away the 12? Do you sense the tragedy here? For the people that said no? To think that the kingdom of God came so near to them. So near to them that if they'd accepted the disciples into their house, they might have found themselves face to face with Jesus. He could have been sharing a table with them. But it didn't happen. Because they failed to show hospitality.

What I do know is this: God is the ultimate host. I believe that God's capacity for hospitality is limitless.

Our limits, the limits WE put on hospitality, are non-existent to God. I believe that God's hospitality is so pervasive, that probably even those folks who said "no thanks" to the 12 in our Gospel today got another chance.

When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable or when we offer hospitality, we are participating in the building of the kingdom of God.

When we fail to let our guard down, when we build artificial walls between ourselves and others, when we 'fail' to offer hospitality -- the kingdom has come near but we've missed it.

The Good News is that even when we fall short, God's hospitality doesn't stop. We are constantly being invited back into the kingdom. Our God is the God of 2nd, and 3rd, and 4th, and 5th, and 88th, and 1000th chances. Every day, multiple times per day, we are being invited to get a glimpse of the kingdom of God by giving and receiving hospitality. Every day we are invited to come face to face with God's image: When we welcome each other and when we welcome the stranger.

May God give us the hearts to do just that.