

A silver-colored sculpture of Romeo and Juliet embracing. The figures are shown in a close, intimate pose, with Romeo on the right and Juliet on the left. They are both wearing period-appropriate clothing. The sculpture is set on a circular base. A white rectangular box with a black border is overlaid on the center of the sculpture, containing the title and author's name.

**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING  
TO ROMEO AND JULIET**

GEOFF NEW

I am a preacher. While I have pastored a church for the past sixteen years with all that entails; the DNA of my call has been to preach the Word of God. Preaching has been, and I imagine always will be, the main expression of what I do as a pastor. Among the many influences which shape me as a preacher, I have one especially unlikely companion as I live out this vocation. It is a story which has accompanied me for over thirty years; William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The effect of the story has increased in potency in my life with the passage of time. It is like an old friend whom I see from time to time and who impacts me and imparts important insight.

As a story, *Romeo and Juliet* is designated a tragedy, but it has many genres embedded in it: action, romance, suspense and comedy. Its main plot is intensified by sub-plots which cause relief, shock and despair. Often simultaneously. A brief synopsis is in order, because even though most are familiar with the name of the story, not everyone might be familiar with the actual story-line. A problem the Bible often suffers from. But first, the story...

*Romeo and Juliet* is set in an Italian city-state, Verona. The actual time in history is unspecified but is probably High Middle Ages or Early Renaissance. The story itself takes place over six days. Two powerful families, the Montagues and the Capulets, both members of the aristocracy, are mortal enemies. Romeo is a Montague and Juliet a Capulet.

The story opens with a street fight between the servants and family members of both houses. When the fight has been quashed by the citizens of Verona, the Prince of Verona declares that the next fray will result in capital punishment. Romeo then appears, for the first time hopelessly in love with a woman called Rosaline. Benvolio (nephew to Montague, and Romeo's friend) is determined to prove to Romeo it is an infatuation. Benvolio contends that if Romeo was to consider other women he would see how misplaced his love is. They discover Rosaline will be at a masquerade ball held by the Capulets that night and so they plan to gate-crash the ball. Mercutio, a friend of Romeo's and a kinsman of the Prince, joins them.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to Juliet, Paris (a nobleman) is asking her father's permission to marry her. The ball will be the occasion for Paris to see if Juliet will have him. Romeo and Juliet

meet at the ball and their love begins. However, Tybalt (nephew of Lady Capulet) recognises Romeo and wants to kill him but Juliet's father forbids it. Capulet states that even though uninvited, Romeo is a guest and seems to be somewhat of a favourite in the town in any case.

The night ends with the famous balcony scene ("O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?") and Romeo and Juliet deciding to marry. Later that day they do so secretly with the help of Friar Laurence (a Franciscan). However, Tybalt is on the prowl in Verona to take revenge on Romeo for gate-crashing the ball. It is a hot day with tempers to match. Tybalt encounters Benvolio and Mercutio and the taunting begins. Romeo arrives from his wedding and despite Tybalt's goading and aggression, refuses to fight his new family member. However, Tybalt and Mercutio draw swords, Romeo steps between them and in the confusion Tybalt kills Mercutio. Romeo is enraged and kills Tybalt. Romeo flees to Friar Laurence's

cell and the Prince exiles the now suicidal Romeo. Meanwhile Juliet receives the news that her cousin is dead and her secret new husband banished. Friar Laurence talks Romeo around, and Romeo and Juliet consummate their marriage that night. Romeo leaves in the morning to his

place of exile: Mantua.

In an attempt to assuage Juliet's grief (mistakenly understood to be over Tybalt's death) her parents grant Paris' wish to marry Juliet. It is planned to happen within days. Juliet seeks Friar Laurence's help. He offers her a powerful sleeping potion which gives the appearance of death. A message will be sent to Romeo so that after she is interred in the family tomb, Romeo can wait there for her to regain consciousness. They can then escape together. However, Friar Laurence's message about the plan does not make it to Romeo. Instead Romeo receives news that Juliet is dead. He arrives at the mausoleum in Verona at night; discovers Paris there and kills him. Romeo then sees Juliet apparently dead, drinks poison and dies. Juliet awakes and sees Romeo dead. She too commits suicide. Finally, the Prince, the Capulets and the Montagues arrive at the scene. Friar Laurence explains all and the two patriarchs end their feud. They will erect golden monuments to commemorate the love of Romeo and Juliet. "Here ends the reading."

**ON THE SURFACE OF IT, IT IS A BLEAK STORY. YET I FIND THE PLOT SOPHISTICATED AND RICH. IT DRAWS ME IN EMOTIONALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY. I FIND THE SCRIPT BEAUTIFUL AND MOVING. I FIND THE SUSPENSE AND STORY-LINE UNEXPECTED.**

On the surface of it, it is a bleak story. Yet I find the plot sophisticated and rich. It draws me in emotionally and intellectually. I find the script beautiful and moving. I find the suspense and story-line unexpected. I love the use of imagery and metaphor when the two star-crossed lovers affirm their love for each other. I love the vivid language which describes the darkness and tragedy of the story. I love the power of the story. The last scene *never* fails to grip my heart when Juliet awakes from the sleeping potion to discover her husband dead and she says; “I will kiss thy lips; haply, some poison doth hang on them, To make me die with a restorative. [kisses Romeo]. Thy lips are warm!” “Thy lips are warm!” – I find that such a heart-breaking way to measure time and loss. Juliet has awoken moments too late and has only just missed being reunited with Romeo; thy lips are warm! It’s genius.

How on earth is all this a source of *inspiration* to me as a preacher? It is not simply the story that keeps inspiring me and giving me cause to reflect as a preacher, it is the *way* the story first came to my attention that has had an enduring effect. Let me explain.

It was 1981 and I was a sixth former (Year 12) at Nelson College. At the beginning of that year our English teacher, Peter Ashby, announced that we would be studying Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. That’s all I needed to hear to realise just how misguided he was. Up until then, the major Shakespearean play I had been exposed to during my schooling was *MacBeth*. That had never gone well. *Julius Caesar* had been tried a few times too, but never seemed as exciting as what I imagined his life to have been like. Although, I did like the death scene. I think it was a guy thing. Which brings me back to *Romeo and Juliet*. While I had never read the story I just knew that it was not a “guy-thing.” I distinctly remember on the day that Mr Ashby announced his intention to teach *Romeo and Juliet* thinking, “This is Nelson BOYS College! You can’t teach a romance story in an all-boys school!” He did. And I fell in love.

I fell in love with the story because I experienced a person who was clearly in a vocation, not a job. Mr Ashby *loved* teaching English. Very clearly it was a lifestyle, not just a job. The only other person I had seen like that in my then sixteen years of life was a novice Catholic priest at the point of his ordination. His journey had impacted me too. Yet I was exposed to Mr Ashby’s vocation in an unexpected way and

over a longer period of time. His teaching was marked by passion, energy, delight and knowledge. Even though the teaching context was at best indifferent to his topic of choice and at worst, hostile, it did not diminish his commitment or faze him in any noticeable way. He taught with skill and without apology and I was converted. The person embodied the message. I was drawn to him and drawn to what he had to say. He was contagious and he infected me with the story. I have been sick with it ever since.

The first thing that arrested me was the way he exegeted the story. The way he explained Shakespearean language. He began with the opening scene where two servants from the Capulet house engage in banter which is witty, crude and laden with sexual innuendo. Mr Ashby was not squeamish about explaining just how crude the script was; it necessitated him explaining features of the female genitalia. An English class had to become a biology class for a time. Then when the servants from

the Montague household appear, one of the Capulet servants “bites his thumb” at the Montague servants. Mr Ashby *explained* it was the equivalent of giving the fingers. I was mesmerised. Truly. I was intrigued and shocked at the revelation

**I DID NOT NEED TO TIGHTLY SHUT MY EYES AND TRY WITH ALL MY BEING TO IMAGINE THE FIRST ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ROMEO AND JULIET AT THE MASQUERADE BALL; I WAS SWEEPED UP IN THE STORY AND WAS THERE.**

at what was *truly* being conveyed by Shakespeare. I thought he only produced lovely, tame and polite material. Juliet’s nurse was equally scandalous in her first scene. The way she prattled on with bawdy language. It was not the actual nature of the material that struck me; it was the sense of understanding and revelation that Mr Ashby facilitated by exegeting the story. Later in the story, on the morning after their wedding night, he explained the significance of why Romeo was saying the bird call was the lark (heralding the morning) and Juliet was insisting it was the nightingale (the bird of the night); this was the moment of Romeo’s exile and Juliet was trying to delay it. I had never encountered anything like it. Mr Ashby’s exegesis transported me into the time and place of medieval Verona. I barely needed to exercise any imagination to see myself in the streets of Verona and witness the violence between the two houses. Or eavesdrop on the conversation between Lady Capulet, the Nurse and Juliet. I did not need to tightly shut my eyes and try with all my being to imagine the first encounter between Romeo and Juliet at the masquerade ball; I was swept up in the story and was there. I was able to listen intently to the way that Romeo and Juliet professed their love to each other with the use of majestic and religious

analogy and metaphor. All because someone who loved the story exegeted it with skill. I went and bought a study guide. I suppose it was my very first commentary. As a preacher, it is this first exposure to the power of exegesis which inspires and challenges me in my work with the biblical text. Mr Ashby demonstrated that such work is not a dour tedious drudgery; it is the light of revelation fuelled by a genuine love of the text.

Thereafter, I never forgot the story, the love or the feeling. It became a part of my story. The year I studied *Romeo and Juliet* was an especially pressured and dark period in my life. The few years before and after were marked by severe family dysfunction and a period of depression. The warm memory of the engagement and the new found love of this story somehow proved to be an oasis in the midst of it all. *Romeo and Juliet* was a touchstone of discovery, vocation, joy, wonder, revelation and inspiration. It stood as *the* highlight of all of my schooling.

It was also powerfully grounded in my life after watching Franco Zeffirelli's movie rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*. This was a classical depiction with characters in medieval costume and I fell in love all over again.

It is hard to explain, but the story took up residence in my heart. It did not serve as an escape as much as a place of light. Through the teaching of the story and the wonder of the story itself – the twists, turns, drama and power of it – I had been exposed to an extravagant vision and it was in my bloodstream. It was to be only a couple of years later when I would be exposed to *the* Story of the ages, and a couple of years after that when I received the call to preach it. May I be so bold as to suggest that God in his providence had mysteriously prepared me for such a vocation by my journey with *Romeo and Juliet*. A sense of vocation, an introduction to exegesis, revelation, wonder and imagination had been birthed within me on the streets of Verona. Now it was finding expression with a new Script about *the* Drama. I had always believed in God and most certainly had faith; however, this Shakespearean play was the catalyst and vehicle which demonstrated to me how a story can be preached in every sense of the word. I was being shown how to read, study, preach and live in the light of a story. It was subversive in a parabolic sense. The Spirit was using this sophisticated parable to say “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37).

In the years that followed I discovered that *Romeo and Juliet* served as a lens through which to consider faith and ministry. Whenever or however the story was performed or shown, I was drawn to it. I also discovered something unexpected. I had become jealous about the story. Some might even say snobbish. Maybe. I love the story and I want it told the right way. My jealousy was evoked if I thought it was not being performed correctly or was being portrayed inappropriately. Some might say that is not snobbish as much as it is judgmental. Maybe. Snobbish? Judgmental? Whatever else I was, I was jealous for it. I was jealous that its power and sweeping drama should be enjoyed and embraced by others. I wanted it preserved so that it remained true. Jealous.

When my daughter was eight years old she joined a community drama group and they put on a performance of several short dramas. At the concert one group of children (10–11 years old) enacted the

opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. My jealousy was kindled. They remembered their lines perfectly but clearly their director did not understand what the lines meant. In carefully rehearsed Shakespearean language these children engaged in talk about

hymens and male erections in front of their rapt, proud and utterly unsuspecting parents.<sup>1</sup> I wanted to bury my head in my hands. I was surprised at the deep feeling of indignation I felt that day. In my view, the drama club had been irresponsible in its use of the text and the training of the children in their charge. The effect of this moment translates to a jealousy concerning the Scriptures. Such jealousy facilitates an awareness of the responsibility incumbent upon preachers: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). In a busy pastoral ministry the temptation to present the Scriptures devoid of hard exegetical work is constantly there. When preachers succumb to that temptation I imagine God buries his head in his hands.

In 1996 a new movie adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Clare Danes) was released. Unlike Zeffirelli's 1968 rendition; this later movie was set in a modern-day setting. It was

<sup>1</sup> Years later I had a similar experience in my capacity as the pastor in my current pastoral charge. The youth group were watching the movie *Grease*. I highlighted the highly charged sexual innuendo, content and message. They had been oblivious to it all.

all very trendy and hip with fashion, cars, guns, SWAT teams, helicopters and a great sound-track; yet the script was pure Shakespeare. The way the actors delivered the lines in Elizabethan language set in what could be modern-day suburban Los Angeles arrested me. The way the centuries-old language was spoken in the 1996 movie with such attitude and feeling seemed to make it even more comprehensible. The way the story was portrayed in a new context was mesmerising and compelling at that stage of my development as a preacher. It was a powerful demonstration of hermeneutics. The 1968 movie was the text *in situ*; the 1996 movie was the text applied to today. What struck me was that the integrity of the story was retained and that the 1996 version increased the power of the story by inspired application. And yet it is good to continue to study the original language and setting, and so I am excited to learn that another movie version is being released this year and it is once again set in medieval Verona.<sup>2</sup>

In more recent times I have attended two performances of the play, by the Auckland Theatre Club in 2010 and the Papakura Theatre Club in 2013. The 2010 performance was marred by an especially vulgar depiction of the masquerade ball scene that was amplified by cat-calls and cheering by a group of secondary school students present that night. Mr Ashby would not have been impressed. My snobbery and jealousy was agitated yet again! Yet, that aside, I enjoyed the rest immensely, including an amazing and flawless portrayal of the notoriously difficult Queen Mab speech by Mercutio just before the masquerade ball. For the first time it really made sense. However, it was the more recent portrayal by the Papakura Theatre Club which was the means of unexpected reflection and revelation. Indeed, it was the motivation to write this article. As I watched this particular performance new things struck me. The first was when Mercutio is killed. Someone in the audience gasped very loudly. Clearly they were unaware of the storyline. I quipped to the person next to me, "They are going to hate the ending!" I was astounded that someone was there who did not know the story. Therein lies the first revelation. Mine is an appalling assumption and I realise it has crept into my preaching. I assume people know the Biblical story. It is easy to preach with that

<sup>2</sup> The 1998 movie, *Shakespeare in Love* was a tongue-in-cheek fictitious story about how Shakespeare came to write *Romeo and Juliet*. I am afraid my snobbery and jealousy was evoked again, "we were not amused."

**IT WAS A GOSPEL MOMENT. THE GOSPEL MOMENT. THE MOMENT OF RECONCILIATION BROUGHT ABOUT BY DEATH. THESE TWO BITTER MEN, WITH MELTED AND BROKEN HEARTS, RECONCILED BY DEATH AND LOVE.**

assumption, and to garnish a sermon with allusions to other parts of Scripture in addition to the passage you are expounding. It is easy to be lazy and to not explain such allusions and draw the listeners in and gift them vision into the biblical world. To fail at this is a sure way to replace gasps with yawns. We have some very new Christians in our congregation; remembering Mr Ashby's vocational and exegetical example is helpful to me.

For all the gasps in the Papakura performance, and they continued in the other death scenes, I discovered that I too inwardly gasped. The end of the performance impacted me in a new way. The bodies of Romeo and Juliet lay entwined on the ground. Friar Laurence explained the events leading up to their deaths to the Prince, Montague and Capulet. Then the breath-taking moment took place. I had never seen the final scene in quite the way it was portrayed as it was at this performance. Capulet said, "O, brother Montague, give me thy hand: this

is my daughter's jointure, for no more can I demand." Montague responded with, "But I can give thee more: for I will raise her statue in pure gold; that while Verona by that name is known, there shall no figure at such rate be set, as that of true

and faithful Juliet." They then shook hands over the bodies of their children. That was the moment that took my breath away. It was a Gospel moment. *The Gospel moment. The moment of reconciliation brought about by death. These two bitter men, with melted and broken hearts, reconciled by death and love; shaking hands over the bodies of a son and daughter. The dividing wall had been brought down by the blood of their children. This moment was then punctuated by the Prince's last words. Again, I heard them in a new way because of the impact of the reconciliation scene. "Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things; some shall be pardon'd, and some punished: for never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo." Go and reflect. Think on these things. Some will be pardoned and some will be punished. It was all so biblical. All so Christ-like.*

A few days later, on a Sunday and just a few moments before I began the worship service; a woman asked me how I had enjoyed the play. I described to her the impact of this last scene on me. I described the moment of healing between the two fathers, and the call to reflect upon it with the encouragement and warning of pardon and punishment. I spoke of how it is such an apt

summary of the message of Scripture and the work of Christ. Tears filled her eyes. I gasped inwardly again because in *that* moment I knew that both our hearts and minds were now centred on the One we were about to worship; the One about whom I was about to preach. The gospel according to Romeo and Juliet had yet again drawn me to the gospel of Christ.

**GEOFF NEW** is the minister of Papakura East Presbyterian Church. His doctoral research is in preaching. He enjoys silent retreats, movies (not silent), indoor rowing and biking. He leads Kiwi-made preaching, and is a regular contributor to *Stimulus*.