***SIMNEL CAKE***

***By Veronica Heley***

Dora declared, ‘I’m on strike! I am not, repeat not, going to do it. And I expect you lot to back me up.’

Her three friends looked anywhere but at Dora. They also avoided looking at the cake she’d brought with her. It was a luscious-looking fruit cake with marzipan through the middle (a difficult feat to bake evenly) and a marzipan layer on top.

It sat on a plate decorated with daffodils, looking every inch ready to celebrate the triumph of Easter. Beside it there was a saucer containing eleven round balls of marzipan.

Dora’s husband, Leo, harrumphed. ‘I can’t see the harm in it, myself. I mean, it’s tradition. The eleven balls of marzipan on Simnel Cake represent the eleven disciples, excluding Judas.’

Dora snorted. ‘They’re called apostles, not disciples. These were the men Jesus chose at the start of his ministry and to take his word out into the world after he died. Disciples were followers of Jesus but they were not the ones chosen by Him in his lifetime.

Leo reddened. ‘Sorry, yes. Slip of tongue. It’s tradition to represent them on the cake for Mothering Sunday. Wasn’t it a brother and sister called Sim and Nell who half baked and half boiled a cake on the day servants returned home with a present for their mothers?’

Dora huffed. ‘Simnel cakes were made long before that.’

‘Got it!’ said Bruce. ‘Lambert Simnel. ‘Wasn’t he trying to pretend he was a long-lost prince, but got found out and spent the rest of his life working in the king’s kitchens?’

Dora was having none of that, either. ‘Simnel cakes go back long before young Lambert Simnel got ideas above his station. If you ask me, he was lucky not to lose his head and he certainly didn’t invent Simnel cakes. You all know what I’m talking about and you’re trying to divert me. And, I will not be diverted.’

Bruce tried to defuse her anger. ‘There’s nothing wrong with tradition. There were eleven apostles and they’re commemorated on Simnel cakes.’

Dora snorted, ‘Should something go on for centuries just because it’s traditional? If you go by tradition, then it would still be all right to hang and burn women as witches, and we’d still have the slave trade. Let’s get right down to it. How many of the apostles’ names can you remember?’

There was an uneasy silence and some counting on fingers.

Sally was the bravest. ‘I can remember eight. The first lot are easy; the inner four of Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, then James and John. They were the closest to Jesus and present at times when the others were excluded from His counsels. Then there are three whom we know something about; Philip, Thomas and Matthew. I’m a bit vague about the others. Another Simon; yes? He had a nickname that I can’t remember for the moment. That’s eight. And then . . . I shall have to look it up.’

Bruce pulled a face. ‘I think I can remember seven, but weren’t there two called Simon? Someone else apart from Simon Peter? If so, then that’s seven for me, too.’

They all looked at big Leo, who was still counting. Shame-faced, he said, ‘Six.’

Dora was triumphant. ‘My very point. See? If you regular church-goers can’t remember, then who can? Another thing, why aren’t there any women included? I wonder how those men would have got on if they hadn’t had a group of women looking after them; paying for their lodgings, washing their clothes, bringing up their children, teaching the youngsters and making sure they all got fed. I say that we ought to have an equal number of men and women on the cake.’

Their friend Bruce, the almost retired accountant, tried to defuse the situation. ‘Yes, Dora, that’s a very good point. But if our minister asked you to make a Simnel cake for Easter, then I don’t see the problem. If she doesn’t object, then why should you?’

Dora yelped, ‘But she’s a woman! We have lots of women ministers now. We have women as treasurers, as lettings officers, teaching in Junior Church, as organists and choir leaders. You name the people who keep the church going nowadays, and they’re all women!’

Leo demurred, ‘Well, not *all,* precisely. Our treasurer is a man, and pretty good he is at it, too. The lettings officer was a woman, but now it’s a man. Granted, the Scouts and Rainbows and so on, they’re now run by women, but . . .’

Dora was outraged. ‘So, if it’s half men and half women today, why don’t we acknowledge it?’

The three of them turned to the fourth member of the group, who was still suffering from Long Covid. She never thought of herself as a great brain, but it was often her quiet suggestions which solved a knotty problem.

She said, ‘I wondered whether . . . I’m not at all sure but . . . Have you some plastic gloves so that I don’t do any damage?’ She slipped a pair on, and picked up one of the round balls of marzipan. She twisted it here and pinched it there, and laid it on the cake. It was no longer a globe, but a ball with a small head on top. It was, in fact, a crude representation of a woman.

Dora, Leo and Bruce leaned forward. One frowned, the other two shook their heads.

Sally wasn’t finished yet. She took another ball and kneaded it into a square. And placed that next to the ‘woman’ on the cake. ‘There,’ she said, ‘We’re celebrating the church this Easter and the people who run it. That’s your minister who’s a woman, and next to her is the treasurer, who is a man. Two down, and nine to go.’

Leo shifted in his chair. ‘Hang about, I don’t think . . .’

Bruce got up from his chair. ‘As usual, Sally has set us a problem to think about. I think we all agree with Dora that it is only right to acknowledge the contribution women make to the running of the church nowadays. But would representing them on the Simnel cake be a good way to do so? Would it offend more people than it would please? Should we leave things as they are, reminding people that there were indeed eleven apostles who were men chosen by Jesus to carry on his work after his death?’

Sally reddened. ‘You’re right. I didn’t think about how it might look to the traditionalists.’

Bruce said, ‘You’ve put forward an interesting idea but I’m afraid it’s going to cause more trouble than it’s worth.’

Dora packed everything away. ‘I’ll tell the minister I didn’t have enough marzipan to make the apostles. I can always put some tiny chocolate eggs on to decorate it instead.’

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On their way home, Dora and Leo met the man who played the organ at church.

Dora asked him, ‘The minister has asked me to make as Simnel cake for Easter, and I can’t remember the names of the eleven apostles. Can you?’

Leo nudged Dora to keep quiet but she persisted, facing the organist with

a steady smile.

The organist said, ‘Well, Matthew, Luke, Mark and John for a start.’

‘Matthew and Mark, yes,’ said Dora. ‘But Luke was a journalist and

came along later, as did Mark.’

‘You’re right. I’d forgotten that. Well, Peter, of course, and James and

John, the sons of Thunder. Their father was Zebedee, wasn’t he? I’ve always liked the sound of him. Did he have a loud voice, I wonder? I’d like to have heard him on a sea shanty or two. Or perhaps, “Eternal Father, strong to save. . .” Which reminds me, we could do with another bass in the choir at the moment.’

‘Who else?’

‘Judas. If you count him.’

‘No,’ said Dora. ‘He’s been blackballed and his successor doesn’t appear on the cake.’

‘Ah, well . . . I’m sure you can look it up,’ said the organist, going on his way.

Leo hissed at his wife. ‘You shouldn’t have shown him up like that.’

Dora gave him a wide-eyed look of innocence. ‘Don’t you think he ought to have known?’

Leo grimaced. ‘Perhaps that applies to all of us. Now, he should have remembered Philip, shouldn’t he? The one who met an important Ethiopian on the road, converted him and sent him on his way to Christianise his home country. The Bible says that after he’d done that, Philip disappeared. I’ve always wondered how he managed to do that. Did a cloud receive him from sight, or did he just grab a seat on the next camel train going home? Doesn’t tradition say he went on to conquer Parthia? Only, I haven’t a clue where Parthia might have been.’

Dora looked as if she wanted to tell him not to be silly but didn’t, because she didn’t know, either.

That afternoon she dropped some supplies in at church and found an old friend of hers there, arranging flowers in church. After the usual small talk, Dora asked, ‘Who’s your favourite apostle?’

‘Thomas the twin.’

They were silent for a while. Dora’s friend had lost twin boys in late pregnancy. That leaves a scar.

She lightened up. ‘I remember him as Doubting Thomas, who doubted that Jesus could have survived until he learned otherwise. Didn’t he go out to India and spread the word there? And somewhere else, too? I can’t remember how he died. The Roman were pretty inventive when it came to capital punishment, weren’t they?’

Dora had to agree. ‘Life expectancy wasn’t great in general terms then, was it? But it certainly didn’t help if you went around telling the occupying army of the Romans that they’d done in the wrong man by killing Jesus.’

‘I wonder what happened to the bandit whom Pilate offered to set free instead of Jesus? Barabbas was a thief and a murderer, wasn’t he?’

Dora grinned. ‘He might have got off on that day, but I bet he came to a sticky end in the long run.’

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Bruce was annoyed with himself. He prided himself on knowing his Bible. His habit was to read some verses every night, following the sequence in his Daily book of prayers. That system – although admirable in many ways – did miss out chunks of the Bible, some of which he hadn’t looked at for years. The lectionary which the church followed was also not helpful if you wanted to know more about a minor and long-forgotten apostle.

So what did he know about the apostles? They hadn’t been seen as minor in their day. After Jesus was taken up to Heaven, they’d had a meeting and divided up the known world, sending them out two or three at a time to spread the word. The system had worked, hadn’t it?

So who had he missed when he tried to count them up?

He’d got the Inner Four, as you might call them. Then there was Thomas the Doubter, Philip who vanished after converting the Ethiopian, and Matthew the tax collector.

Of course Bruce would remember the tax collector. Bruce had a fellow feeling for someone who tried to keep other people’s accounts in order.

Then yes, there was a second Simon, called . . . ‘the Canaanite?’ Or ‘the Zealot?’ It must have made life easier for the apostles when Jesus renamed Simon as ‘Peter.’

Bruce consulted the internet and discovered that Simon ‘the Zealot’ had become the second bishop of Jerusalem. There was, as always when you consulted the internet, some confusion about who did what to whom, and why. But apparently, though Simon might have gone on his travels with a couple of the others, he did return home and then stayed put.

Bully for Simon the Zealot. ‘The Zealot’ probably meant he was a political animal, and not necessarily filled with fire and brimstone.

Bruce wondered what Simon’s sermons were like.

That made eight. Three to go . . .

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Sally had a doctor’s appointment. Or rather, since the doctor was restricting most appointments to the telephone, she’d been asked to go to the surgery for another blood test.

As she was slowly recovering from Long Covid, they were ‘keeping an eye’ on her. This entailed visits to the surgery which entailed a tiring walk up the hill or waiting till Bruce could take her in the car. Then she had to wait outside the building until the exact time of her appointment before being let in.

Today Bruce could take her and she didn’t have to wait long before being taken into the practice nurse’s den. She sat quietly – and not looking at what was happening – while the nurse took phials of her blood.

Sally was still mulling over the problem Dora had set them. Shouldn’t women be equally commemorated on the cake, and which of the apostles was it that she couldn’t bring to mind?

And there was the answer in a poster on the wall. Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital, usually known as ‘Bart’s.’ Specialists in this and that; hopefully nothing that Sally would need to know about.

Sally said to the nurse, ‘Did you train at Bart’s? Do you know why they chose the name Bartholomew for the hospital?’

‘Hm? I did ask once. The hospital was built on the site of a church or an abbey or something like that, which had been called St Bartholomew the Less. It was one of the ruins that Henry VIII knocked about. I believe the saint offended someone and got flayed alive. Honestly, the things they did to people in the old days!’ The nurse labelled up the phials. ‘And that’s you done.’

Sally wondered what St Bartholomew would have thought of the fact that a couple of thousand years later, his name was commemorated in a hospital.

But at least she’d added another apostle to her list in a way she could remember.

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Bruce closed his laptop. ‘Well, Sally; I’ve looked up the last of the apostles and I can’t say I’m much the wiser. There’s James, son of Alpheus. who might be a brother of Jesus or might be the one they called James the Less. Was he vertically challenged, perhaps? He was one of those who went off to spread the gospel in far flung places.

‘As for Jude; that’s another name for Thaddeus, believe it or not. He went on his travels with Simon the Canaanite, who was also called the Zealot. That Simon is the one who’s supposed to have ended up as the second bishop of Jerusalem. It makes remembering them more difficult because we seem to have three men named or nicknamed James, and two called Simon.’

Sally started to hum, ‘Hey Jude.’ She said, ‘I can’t think beyond the Beatles song. I love that tune.’

‘Agreed. But I’m worried about what Dora is going to do about this motley collection of apostles? Some of them seem to have dropped out of sight and others we remember because they were shining stars at the time, and still are.’

Sally said, ‘I have an idea which might work. I’ll talk to Dora about it, and see if our minister agrees.’

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The minister placed Dora’s cake on a pedestal at the front or the church. Beside it she put the saucer bearing eleven balls of marzipan.

She said, ‘I expect you’ll all have heard about Simnel cakes which are eaten at any time from Mothering Sunday to Easter. They have an unusual decoration of eleven little balls on top, which commemorate the eleven apostles chosen by Jesus to send out the Good Word to the world after his death. I expect you can all remember some of them, such as Peter, James and John. You may remember Andrew, Matthew the tax collector, Doubting Thomas, and Philip the Evangelist but others we never hear about nowadays.

‘As time goes by, some of them are replaced in our memories by later saints. For instance, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are brought to mind every Sunday when we read from the Gospels and yet only two of those – Matthew and John - were actually Apostles.

‘Nowadays we may find ourselves thinking more of other saints who have taken the Word out into the world. St Paul, for instance. He actually claimed the title of Apostle for himself, but it’s usual to say the Apostles were called by Jesus in his lifetime and his other followers are known as disciples.

‘Now I’m going to see what happens if we replace some of the Apostles with saints who may perhaps seem more relevant to us today. Let us start with the four writers of the Gospel, and St Paul.’

She put five little globes of marzipan on the cake. ‘Any other suggestions?’

A long pause and then a middle-aged woman said, half joking, ‘I think of St Anthony of Padua a lot, because I’m always losing things and he helps me find them again.’

There was a ripple of laughter as the minister placed another ball on the cake. Then a woman on the other side of the church called out, ‘Shouldn’t Mary be on the cake, as the mother of Jesus?’

A neighbour said, ‘No, she’s too important. She should be in the middle if she’s on there at all.’

‘What about Mother Teresa?’ A voice from the back of the church.

The minister nodded. ‘Mother Teresa. Agreed. That makes seven.’

‘I nominate Mr Mandela?’

The minister put another ball on. ‘Mr Mandela, definitely. What a role model! That’s eight.’

The Guide leader said, ‘I’d propose our Queen, but I suppose that wouldn’t be allowed. Only, I think she’s more Christian than most.’

The minister smiled. ‘I’m with you, but perhaps not in this context.’

‘I know,’ said an elderly man. ‘We need all the help we can get in these dark times. Let’s call on our country’s saints: George for England, Andrew for Scotland, David for Wales and Patrick for Northern Ireland.’

There was some counting on fingers.

The minister hesitated. That’s one too many. ‘The four Gospel makers and St Paul make five. The modern saints take us up to eight, and the four patriotic saints make twelve. Who do we drop?’

The same man said, ‘Why can’t we have twelve? If we’re changing tradition as to names, why does there still only need to be eleven?’

One of the women who spoke earlier said, ‘I think that tradition is there for a purpose. It reminds us where we came from, and that we shouldn’t forget our roots. It’s important to remember that there were eleven apostles who were faithful to their calling.’

The woman who’d suggested St Anthony of Padua put up her hand. ‘Look, this is daft. I withdraw St Anthony and keep him for my own use. As for the rest, surely it doesn’t matter what names we put on them? There are eleven balls by tradition, and who we think they represent is up to us, each one of us. I’d forgotten, if I ever knew, the names of some of the apostles. I don’t suppose they meant much to me when I first heard them, and they mean less now. But it’s good to be reminded that there have always been men and women who risked life and limb to spread the Word.

‘When I make my Simnel Cake this year, I’m going to put eleven little balls on top and think about the old and new; people who have gone out into the world and told the story that God gave us. If that means I’m going to think more about St George, Mother Teresa and Mr Mandela, than the apostles whose names I can’t remember, then so be it.’

The minister said, ‘Saints can be ancient or modern. The idea is that we choose our role models wisely, and remember them well.’