

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 26th June 2022

Some context

After retiring I moved to Palmerston North from Auckland, where I was on the staff of the Cathedral, just about a year ago. I count it a blessing to be part of this worshipping community, and I thank the Vicar, Stuart, for this opportunity to preach.

Prayer

Over the last two and a bit years we have lived through an experience that has been unique for all the world. In so many ways we have had to deal with situations where there was no script to follow.

None of us would have ever imagined a time when we would not be permitted to go to church. In the circumstances we faced we really could say we lived from day to day, waiting to see what might befall us on the morrow. In the letter to the Galatians, from which our Epistle reading (Galatians 5:1,13-25) for today was taken, we receive some very practical instruction from the Apostle Paul. He gives us instruction for Godly living. It is simple: walk in the Spirit. We believe that through Baptism and Confirmation God the Holy Spirit comes into our lives. It is one thing to have the Spirit and another thing to walk in the Spirit. Having the Holy Spirit has to do with our theology of God the Holy Trinity, The act of walking in the Spirit has to do with our Christian living.

We are told that our flesh – our natural self – is in opposition to the Spirit. They are contrary to one another. Someone who is attempting to resist the flesh, as we all are exhorted to do, in their own strength will find it an insurmountable task. The method for putting the deeds of the flesh to death is not through mustering up enough willpower but rather by means of the Spirit. This task is not one that we do for God; rather God accomplishes this task in and through us.

When we sin by indulging the flesh, because we are Christians, we are distressed by our sin. The distress that we feel is confirmation that the Spirit of God is convicting us of our sin and turning us towards Jesus..

St Paul tells the believers to walk by the Spirit and they won't be under the condemnation of the law. In so many ways our Christian life is a conflict between law and grace. When we walk by the Spirit we are living in God's grace. We will certainly still be tempted to sin, but the Spirit helps us to live in such a way as to leave the desires of our temptation unfulfilled.

So what are we then to do? St Paul immediately tells us. We are to show the fruit of the spirit. In the English it is not easy to tell that the word which is translated as 'fruit' in the Greek is singular. The point of this is that this list of attributes given us by St Paul is not made up of individual commodities but are rather a whole of which there are a number of pieces. Our lives should manifest all of them.

We should also note that we are not talking here about the gifts of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is not to be confused with the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit are given

to edify, or build up, the body of Christ, the Church. We see the gifts evidenced through the ministry we receive from others. The fruit of the Spirit are the characteristics of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

Any gardener will tell you a sweet fruit tree will produce sweet fruit. We are able to identify the type of tree by evidence of its fruit. A sour fruit tree cannot produce sweet fruit. The fruit of the Spirit which God produces in us is the sweet evidence of the grace of God in our lives.

The list St Paul gives us can be broken up and placed under three headings. Let us take a brief look at each one under its heading:

Firstly, we see love, joy, peace which say something about how we are disposed towards God and humans:

Love - This love is one of sacrifice where we do right by those we see as our sisters and brothers. This kind of love sacrifices its own concerns for the concerns of others. The very essence of this word is hoping the best for others.

Joy - This is not the warm feeling of benevolence or the bubbly, perky, always-up emotion that is frequently confused with joy. Joy is a gladness or a deep-seated contentment. Joy and happiness are not the same thing. Someone could be experiencing a difficult time of trial yet is able to maintain joy throughout. In addition, this joy in some cases is difficult if not impossible to express because it is centred in the glory of God.

Peace - There are many sides to this word but the best common thread is that a lack of peace means the presence of some form of war – be it wrangles, dissensions, contentions, selfishness or ambitions. To demonstrate peace we need to rid our lives of those things.

The second heading covers our relationships with other people: here we have patience, kindness and generosity.

Patience – this is what in older translations of Scripture was termed longsuffering. It refers to a gentleness of our mind, which disposes us to take everything in good part, and not to be easily offended. This fruit rushes to find the good, not to find the opportunity for complaint or criticism. We can say that this is in short supply in our modern world where people are so easily offended.

Kindness - This aspect of the fruit of the Spirit involves friendliness, charity, hospitality and integrity. It produces concern for others and longs to see the needs of others met.

Generosity - This refers to an upright or good heart that is quick to complete a thoughtful deed. Its motivations are pure.

The third heading brings us to faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, which are descriptions of our character:

Faithfulness - Primarily this refers to a person who is characterized by Christian faith. This is a deep faith in God and the activity of God in our world. It also refers to a person who imitates God and is dependable, trustworthy and whose word is sure.

Gentleness or meekness – This is a disposition that flows from humility. This is not the opposite of boldness. This is not someone who is a pacifist nor someone unable to stand up for their convictions. A meek person rather is one who doesn't need harshness or fervent emotion to bolster their position.

Self-control or what used to be called temperance - Interestingly, this last fruit refers to one who, while being called self-controlled is actually a person who is controlled by the Holy Spirit. This is someone who is able to keep their temper, their emotions and their behaviour under control because they rely on the Holy Spirit.

Now we come to the tricky part. These nine characteristics should be seen as a whole. We cannot pick and choose – saying 'Today I'll be generous and self-controlled, whereas tomorrow I'll be patient and gentle. We are to attempt to show all nine of the characteristics which are collectively called the fruit of the Spirit all of the time.

This is the way of life to which we are called. May God bless us as we show forth the fruit of the Spirit in our lives in the week ahead.

Richard Girdwood