

Sermon for Pentecost Sunday – 31st May 2020

Last Tuesday evening I was involved in a discussion in which we were invited to explore those things which had surprised us during lockdown – in both positive and negative ways. In the course of the conversation, one participant described feeling calmer. She is a secondary school teacher, so the nature of her work involves a lot of interaction with people, and the education sector can be notoriously stressful, with significant political and public interest. This teacher described finding that her emotions are less extreme, partly because there is less opportunity for immediate response to those around her.

It was a comment which struck me because on that particular day I had experienced almost the opposite of what it felt like she was describing. Having found myself sitting on my own, getting increasingly concerned about how different people would respond to what felt like unclear advice from the government on easing of lockdown restrictions, it was two regular meetings, bringing me into contact with other people, which brought calm and helped me to gain perspective. Not because we discussed the issues that were concerning me, but because somehow my concerns evaporated in the face of dealing with normal business.

It is a cliché worth repeating that each one of us has been made uniquely different. We respond differently to situations; we bring different insight; one person's hope is another's fear. And if we are so varied, we shouldn't be surprised to find that the Holy Spirit works in different ways through each one of us as well.

Some years ago I was given a gift of Bible ribbon page markers. At the bottom of each ribbon is a bead, each with one of the fruits of the Spirit, as set out in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I don't know about you, but when faced with a list like that, I've always felt somewhat inadequate. A friend and I would sometimes discuss sharing the fruits, so that between us we would try to accomplish them, but we both knew that managing to be all nine things together felt an impossible ask.

Of course, as we all know, context is everything, and St. Paul was extremely challenged by the Galatians' unruly behaviour. He sets the fruits of the Spirit as a counterpoint to the works of the flesh, which included fornication, jealousy, anger, quarrels, envy and drunkenness. If these were the behaviours he witnessed among the Christian community in Galatia, it is little wonder that he chose to emphasise more gentle qualities.

Nevertheless, while it is impossible to criticise the nine fruits of the Spirit, I wonder whether they leave space for passion and conviction; drive and determination; each of which can have both positive and negative outworkings, but mitigate against passivity.

This is where the gifts of the Spirit identified by early church writers and originating in the words of Isaiah 11 are an interesting counterpoint. These are the qualities of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. While they are in no way incompatible with the fruits of the Spirit set out in Galatians, their emphasis is somewhat different, and perhaps gives a little more space for active as well as passive virtues.

St. Paul has another go at gifts of the Spirit in the reading we have heard from his first letter to the Corinthians. Here he identifies gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles,

prophecy, the discernment of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Once again, context is important, and here Paul is really emphasising that we are all different and the gifts of the Spirit will therefore look different in each of us.

One of the things I love about the scriptures is that the different writers often approach things from different perspectives. St. Paul was ever practical and was speaking into particular situations. His letters often present as prescriptive and specific – he certainly does detail. There are undoubtedly some poetic passages in St. Paul's letters, but even these are often grounded in concrete experience.

In John's gospel, though, we find Jesus speaking about the Holy Spirit differently. Instead of identifying specific gifts or fruits, his concern is to introduce the Spirit as advocate, comforter, counsellor and helper. The focus here is on a relationship that we can enter into. Which makes sense of the gospel reading, in which he breathes the Holy Spirit onto the disciples after the resurrection. Jesus will no longer be with them as their friend, but the Holy Spirit can be.

Sometimes it feels a little like St. Paul's letters and John's gospel are coming at the same matter from different ends of the telescope. St. Paul is looking at what is happening on the ground and identifying which behaviours he believes to be compatible with God's teachings. In John's gospel, Jesus starts from the other end, introducing the disciples to the Holy Spirit, breathing that same spirit into them, and having faith that, filled with the Holy Spirit as their advocate, comforter, counsellor and helper, the works that they do will fulfil the will of God.

So what about us, on this feast of Pentecost? Do we find ourselves inspired by St. Paul's ability to identify qualities that we might perhaps find within ourselves; that we take the time to nurture and develop; that we can see in others and can help them to see in themselves? Or do we prefer to recognise that we have a living relationship with the Holy Spirit, and in nurturing that relationship, we might dare to believe that our actions become more focused towards our God-given calling?

It won't surprise you to know that I think it might be a bit of both – and crucially that the balance will look different for each one of us. Just as each one of us is called to different things by God.

The fruits and gifts of the Spirit are undeniably valuable qualities, and we will all have seen examples of individuals embodying those attributes. Taking time to recognise in ourselves and others where we identify the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is part of our discipleship.

Yet where those qualities become a way to punish ourselves or others for not being up to standard, we need to gently turn the telescope round the other way and seek to spend some time with the Holy Spirit, seeking guidance about where and to what we are truly called. The work of the Holy Spirit will look different in each one of us, and the closer we come to fulfilling God's will for us, the more complete we will feel. That's what Jesus means by the Spirit leading us into truth; and the truth setting us free.

Amen