

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

(Galatians 5.19-26 and John 15.1-12)

*He's a terrible gardener. Last week his artificial lawn died!
What are you going to do with that manure? I'm going to put it on my rhubarb.
That's a change, we have custard with ours!*

Looks like we're into gardening this week, doesn't it? Vines and fruit in John and more fruit in Galatians. Where do you stand on gardening?

Are you knowledgeable - sowing seeds in the greenhouse, potting on the little plants, hardening them off, planting them out, tending them and finally enjoying the fresh vegetables or the beautiful flowers? Do you know how and when to prune the honeysuckle and cut back the clematis? You see, I know the jargon but only because Gill, my wife, learned these things at her father's knee, or rather, in his allotment and I have been married to this keen gardener for a lot of years.

Or do you just cut the lawn along with the daisies and dandelions which over the years have infiltrated it?

Or do you employ a professional gardener who knows just what to do and leave it to him or her?

In our passage from his letter to the Galatians Paul is typically punchy. There Paul is comparing what he calls 'the acts of the sinful nature' with what he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit'. Why does he not say 'the fruit of the sinful nature'? Surely the list of things in v19-21 grow out of the sinful nature just as the list of things in v22 grow out of the action of the Holy Spirit.

I think he does it to emphasise the contrast. It is as if he is classifying the products of the sinful nature as weeds in God's garden which are useless and need to be pulled out. Whereas what grows from the action of the Holy Spirit is to be tasted, digested, enjoyed and shared.

I described the Galatians passage as 'punchy'. Perhaps 'dramatic' would be a better description. We get this long list of sinful activities covering three verses, almost spat out. This is how the Message Bible translates the list: Repetitive cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cut-throat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided houses and divided lives; small- minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalising everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community.

That's strong stuff; but it emphasises graphically the contrast Paul wants to make with what he calls *the fruit of the Spirit*.

What is more, you only have to look at the television news or a read a newspaper to recognise in those words the sort of society that exists in our country today. No wonder our archbishops are urging a week for prayer for Christian revival – it starts next Monday here at St. Mary's incidentally.

So much for the weeds. What about the contrasting fruit? Again, let's see how that is described in the Message with the prefacing words, *But what happens when we live God's way*:

He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

So that's what we are to aim at in our lives says St. Paul – lots of wonderful fruit and not a weed in sight. And we have a choice. We have freedom to choose as he makes clear in v13 of the chapter. He urges us to choose the fruit:

You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love. And that word LOVE is the word

which Paul puts first and which, I think, in a way, gathers together the fruits listed by Paul – the portmanteau word for all those elements in vv 22 and 23.

The Spirit whose fruit Paul talks about is the Spirit of God through Jesus and the reading we had from John's gospel ends like this:

*As the Father has loved me so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you **will** remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.*

The problem we have is that we just can't do it - however hard we try. It's all very well Paul saying *Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature*. But our human nature **is** sinful so we're on a loser – except for Jesus.

So – back to the garden and the example Jesus himself gives us. Christians, he says, are fastened to him – *I am the vine and you are the branches*. Then comes that truth that even non-gardeners can understand - that if the branch is separated from the main stem, it is finished; it will just wither and die. And if it withers and dies, what chance have we of producing and using Paul's fruit of the Spirit?

So the secret is: stick with Jesus. Our former bishop, Tom Wright, in characteristic fashion, describes what this means in practical terms: *We must be in the community that knows and loves him and celebrates him as its Lord. We can't 'go it alone'.*

It is so important to take every opportunity to be with our fellow Christians – in worship together, in prayer together, in discussion together, in eating together, in working together. It won't work if we are only here in Church every so often, if we steer clear of being together at home groups and similar meetings, if we keep our distance.

But there is another aspect to the business of sticking to Jesus. Tom Wright again:

We must also be people of prayer and worship in our own intimate, private lives. We must make sure to be in touch, in tune, with Jesus, knowing him and being known by him.

But the divine gardener has knife and uses it. Why? Because it's the way to get really good fruit or veg. In Jesus' example it is to get good grapes. In a more homely example, a gardener will nip out some flower buds so that the plant concentrates on making bigger and better flowers. If you were tuned in to Gardeners World on BBC 2 a week or so ago you would have seen Jack from Cumbria doing just that with his dahlias. And I think we can fairly extend the analogy by talking about God as the wielder of the weed-killer because weeds inhibit the growth of productive plants.

So it's not going to be plain sailing, this business of producing those so obviously desirable fruits of the Spirit. God will intervene to keep us fruitful and that may be to stop us doing something we very much want to do or push us to do something which is very hard but which in either case will help us to be loving or joyful or peaceful or patient or kind or good or faithful or gentle or self-controlled.

So, where have we got to?

Paul urges us to choose – yes, to choose – to cultivate the fruit of the Holy Spirit of the Jesus who loves us and asks us to share his love. It can be tough going sometimes but if we stick close to Jesus we can do it!

We've talked a lot about gardening and I have come across a little something which goes some way to being a practical guide to Spirit fruitfulness. It is entitled *The Ultimate Kitchen Garden* and gives what it calls *the plan for the garden of your daily living*.

Plant three rows of peas:

1. Peace of mind
2. Peace of heart
3. Peace of soul

Plant four rows of squash

1. Squash gossip
2. Squash indifference
3. Squash grumbling
4. Squash selfishness

Plant four rows of lettuce

1. Lettuce be faithful
2. Lettuce be kind
3. Lettuce be patient
4. Lettuce really love one another

Plant three rows of turnips:

1. Turnip for meetings
2. Turnip for worship
3. Turnip to help one another

Plant three types of thyme:

1. Thyme for each other
2. Thyme for family
3. Thyme for friends

It ends like this – Water freely with patience and cultivate with love, and there will be much fruit in your garden because you reap what you sow.

But I would add a last word – make sure Jesus is there, advising you and supervising all you do!

Yes? **YES.**