

The Fruit of the Spirit

A sermon given by Nigel Guthrie at Holy Cross, Crediton on 27 June 2010

Secular research into wellbeing going back to the 1970's has often shown two things which are very interesting from the Christian point of view. Firstly well being is only related to material prosperity up to a point. People benefit from good housing and a reasonable income, but beyond that being richer does not necessarily make people happier. Secondly a religious life does, in general, lead to a greater sense of well being. Other research links membership of a church with a positive effect on general health.

When we look at St Paul's very clear teaching about the Christian life in Galatians chapter 5 we can see a pattern emerging. For St Paul the whole law is summed up in a single commandment 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. You might think that those who always consider themselves first might be happiest. But St Paul draws a sharp distinction between behaviour which gratifies the flesh and what he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit'. The list of fleshly behaviour is enough to make any decent Anglican feel embarrassed: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing. We know that they are bad for us but most of us have probably indulged in one or more of these at some point in our lives. Paul realizes that they are harmful to ourselves and to others and are opposed to a spiritual life. When we are engaging in these things than we are not truly loving ourselves or our neighbours. But we don't have to look far to see examples of such behaviour encouraged in our society, as they were no doubt in Paul's time too. A quick word with a nurse serving in A&E or a police officer or a psychiatric doctor will confirm how our addiction to drink and drugs in our society causes immense harm to individuals, families and communities. I'm sure that faithfulness in sexual relations and moderation in the consumption of alcohol are two of the elements which contribute to the relative well being of religious believers which shows up in the research I mentioned.

On the positive side Paul speaks of the Fruit of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity and self control'. If our families and communities and nations were full of people who showed these qualities we would surely have a much better world. And the last four of those 'patience, kindness, generosity and self-control we can all do something about. It's not always easy to act patiently, kindly, generously and with self control but we can try. Indeed we can and should challenge ourselves and reflect on our behaviour, especially when things have gone wrong in a relationship. Was I patient or was I quick to get angry? Was I kind or was I unsympathetic? Was I generous or was I mean? Did I control myself or did my temper or get the better of me? Of course our lives won't always show the gifts of the Spirit as much as we might wish. But, as Christians we can be assured of two things. Firstly, if we live and are guided by God's Spirit, as Paul suggests we should, our lives will bear some of this good fruit. Secondly, when we are sorry for our failings before God he will forgive us so that we can look ahead and not look back in regret. As Jesus said "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." God wants us to look ahead and to bear good fruit.

It's interesting that secular research starts from the point of view of the individual and looks at what contributes to our wellbeing. By contrast Jesus starts from our relationship with others. Our faith turns the world upside down because it suggests that it's only when we love our neighbours as ourselves that we become fully ourselves. Or as Jesus puts it so succinctly 'those who lose their life for my sake will gain it.'