

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

4. Peace

John 14:15-31

When I was in the Sixth Form, I spent my summer holidays shifting fridges, washing machines and radiograms the size of large coffins in the regional warehouse of a national electrical chain. The canteen where we had our lunches was fairly down-market, but we did always have fish on Fridays. It has to be said that the cooks were never going to win any Michelin stars and fish was not one of their specialities either. So when the little brown lump of something that had once been swimming round the North Sea appeared on your plate each week, it became known as *“the piece of cod which passeth all understanding.”*

That’s where we’re up to in our reflections on *“The Fruit of the Spirit”*. You remember that Paul writing to the Galatian Christians told them that to counteract the effects of the *“acts of the sinful nature”* they should cultivate *“the fruit of the Spirit”* – the nine characteristics of the lives of those who follow Jesus along the way of the Holy Spirit. We’ve looked at the first two of these segments of the fruit – not a checklist or a menu, but a holistic package – and they are **love** and **joy**. Today we look at **peace** – the peace of God which, as Paul tells the Philippians, passes all understanding – is beyond our comprehension.

The Greek word is *“eirene”*, which is the root of a little used English word, *“eirenic”*, meaning “peace-loving”, and of the more common name Irene. (By “more common”, I mean you see it more often than *“eirenic”*, not that Irene is a name for common people!) Generally speaking, in English **peace** is used negatively, to mean an absence of war or of noise or of anxiety. In Classical Greek it was used in a rather more positive way and was the usual word of greeting – *“Peace be with you!”* In Hebrew, the context in which Jesus would have used it, it had a very positive thrust and was much wider than simply the absence of war and so on. It translates the Hebrew word *“shalom”*, which means **peace** in the sense of well-being, prosperity and so on. To wish someone peace was to wish them the very best in life, and to have peace in a community was to have a state of law and order which gave rise to all the blessings of prosperity, as Jeremiah wrote about in his letter to the exiles in *Jeremiah 29:7ff*.

A bit like the concepts of **love** and **joy** which we’ve already looked at, the concept of **peace** runs throughout the Bible. It’s probably best expressed in the High Priestly (or Aaronic) Blessing in *Numbers 6:22-26*:

*The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites.
Say to them:*

*‘“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;*

*the Lord turn his face towards you
and give you peace.”*

Peace, then, is God’s will for his people – a life of well-being, prosperity, freedom from anxiety: “*living life to the full*”, as Jesus put it. And in the context of what Jesus is saying to his followers in the words we read from John’s Gospel again this morning, it is probably that aspect of freedom from anxiety and a positive outlook on life that is to the fore.

We’ve looked into these chapters towards the end of John’s Gospel to help us in our thinking about **love** and **joy** as well. Jesus is here trying to prepare his closest friends for the trauma that they are about to experience when he is taken from them and executed. Jesus knows what is going to happen to him – they don’t. And Jesus knows how they will react – as any normal human being would react when someone they are close to is suddenly taken from them. So he promises them that it will all be alright in the end. And he gives them his peace. Jesus is not just wishing them peace here – this isn’t something along the lines of the day-to-day greeting (both in Greek and Hebrew or Aramaic) with which they’d have been very familiar. Jesus is bequeathing them his peace. The word he uses in v27 which is translated here as “*give*” is a word that has that sense of bequeathing, passing on – very much as he will be passing on the gift of his Holy Spirit.

The people who follow Jesus Christ – his disciples, his friends, Christ-ians – will live lives that are characterised by a positive, confident attitude. In the ups and downs of life, they will approach things with an equanimity that is obvious, and which clearly comes from beyond themselves. As with the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit, this will be in complete contrast to the chaos of the sinful nature. And it will be because of the peace which they have with God – and will be reflected in their relationships with each other within the Christian community and in their relationships with their fellow human beings beyond the Church.

Peace is something that we often speak about in terms of relationships between nations – the absence of war, of not of tension. It usually comes up at election time – Jeremy Corbyn’s comments about pacifism, arguments about whether we should continue to keep weapons that can destroy half the earth and all its people, defence spending, and so on. But all that is what Jesus refers to here as **peace** “*as the world gives*”: peace that comes from ignorance of the threats involved, or from self-reliance (“We can overcome this on our own.”). Most people, though, are looking for a peace that is a bit more immediate – peace within themselves, peace in the face of the situations that we encounter day by day, peace about an uncertain personal future. A Stoic philosopher called Epictetus – not a Christian – who lived from 58AD to 135AD, wrote this:

“While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passions, grief and envy. He cannot even give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than even for outward peace.”

The peace the emperor gives – and all those like him – is this “*peace as the world gives*” and it is ultimately unfulfilling and unsatisfactory. It is based on human effort and wisdom, so it is as flawed as anything else we try to do in our own strength. But Jesus comes to give another kind of peace: “*Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you.*” This is a peace guaranteed by Jesus, just as **love** and **joy** were guaranteed by him and sealed in his death and resurrection. This peace is an assurance, a calm serenity (the word we’ve used before), an acceptance that it is going to be alright, that this is not all there is and the alternative is waiting for us. It is not a peace which manages to avoid trouble, that simply ignores or skirts round the difficulties we encounter. Look what Jesus says in *16:33*. He draws this long conversation with his friends to a close with these words:

‘I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’

This is a peace which, rather than avoiding difficulty, triumphs over it. You and I may count ourselves as followers of Jesus, we may well believe we have our eternal future all sorted out, but we are still human. We still live lives of fragility and vulnerability. We still live in a world infected by evil in which stuff happens that we wish didn’t. We can still be hurt, harmed, scared and saddened. But, says Jesus, “*Take heart! I have overcome the world.*” Jesus has dealt with everything that could possibly cause us grief and anxiety.

When he was speaking with his followers in this conversation that hadn’t yet happened – but he knew what was going to happen in the next few hours. Jesus was about to engage in a cataclysmic battle with evil from which evil would never recover. As he hung on the cross he would defeat the power of evil over us – power to harm us, power to influence us, power to keep us in submission. As he left the tomb a couple of days later he would defeat the power of death over us – power to scare us, power to diminish us, power to limit us. Evil is still thrashing about, beaten and humiliated but trying to do as much damage as it can before it is finally and eternally banished at the coming of God’s Kingdom. That’s why we have to put up with the rubbish we so often see happening around us and experience happening to us. Beyond that, though, we can rest assured – and that’s what the peace of God really is: a restful assurance – that our eternal future is secure.

You see, over that Easter weekend Jesus dealt definitively with the two things that cause us as human beings most unease, most anxiety – evil and death. They are the things that mean we cannot enjoy peace, God’s peace, the peace that he intended us to enjoy when he created us. By his death and resurrection,

Jesus declared that we no longer need to worry about that. With him, in him, we can look forward to an eternal future that will be just what God always wanted for us.

Jesus met Mary Magdalene early on Easter morning. He met the rest of his followers later that day. And what were the first words to his followers after his death and resurrection? Look in *John 20:19* (and again in *20:26*) – “*Peace be with you!*” Yes, it was the usual greeting, as we said earlier, but now it was imbued with new meaning, new hope – with real peace. In fact, Jesus repeats it almost immediately to emphasise what this is all about. It’s a great characteristic to possess, and it is the gift of Jesus to us his followers, a gift which, like love and joy, is to be seen in all that we are and all that we do. There should be peace and concord between us as his people, our life together characterised by harmony and acceptance.

And it is not only a fruit of the Spirit, but, as Jesus makes abundantly clear here, a gift from himself. He gives us his peace – a special peace, an otherworldly peace, a lasting peace. It’s a peace that we can receive by faith and a peace that will transform our eternal destiny, as Paul writes in *Romans 5:1*:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

Reach out this morning and accept the peace that Jesus offers. Pray that your life will be characterised by peace and that it will be obvious to others.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) What do you understand by the word "peace"? Would you say that you experience it?
- 2) Why is peace such an elusive concept for many people?
- 3) What kinds of things spoil your peace? How do you deal with them?
- 4) Should Christians be pacifists?
- 5) How can we most effectively display peace in our lives – personally and as a church?

