

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

5. Patience

Ephesians 4:1-6

The books on preaching and the conference speakers always say that you can't preach anything you haven't experienced. This morning's reflection on the next part of the Fruit of the Spirit comes to you after a week in which my own experience of **patience** has been severely challenged by all sorts of things, so let me begin with an apology to those who happened to be around when my own rather scant reserves of it had run out and an acknowledgement that it is an area where I need to do a fair bit of work and some pretty focussed praying!

As I say, we come this morning to the fourth of the nine segments of the “*fruit of the Spirit*”, as Paul describes it to the Christians in Galatia. In *Galatians 5* we read of the tension that there is between the “*acts of the sinful nature*” and this “*fruit of the Spirit*” and Paul encourages his readers to seek to cultivate this fruit as a way of demonstrating that they are walking in the way of the Holy Spirit. We've already looked at **love**, **joy** and **peace**, qualities which should help mark us out as people who are following Jesus and which serve as a witness to others of the transforming power of Jesus on our lives. We've noted that these nine characteristics of the Fruit of the Spirit are not a menu from which to choose, nor a checklist of success, but a package that should be taken whole – all nine qualities being shown in our lives.

So what about **patience**, then? We've had a quick look at the Greek word Paul uses in each case so far and there has been something worth noticing with each word. The Greek word that is translated “*patience*” here – and in pretty well all other places in the New Testament – is *makrothumia*. It's a compound word, in that it's made up of two other words which mean “*long*” and “*anger*”. It's defined in various dictionaries along the lines of “*prolonged restraint of anger or agitation*”. In other words, the particular aspect of patience Paul has in mind here is what we might also refer to as “*forbearance*” or “*longsuffering*”. It's not quite the same as the kind of endurance that means putting up with stuff or waiting for a long time: that's a different word in Greek and is usually qualified in some way when it's used in the New Testament, something along the lines of “*patient endurance*” as you find in a couple of places in *Revelation*.

This is to do with holding back your emotion, particularly your anger, when there is a situation or a person who gets you annoyed or upset. It's a word that is used of God when he holds back his wrath against sinners. Peter uses it in that context in *2 Peter 3:9,15*:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” and
“Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation”

God holds back on his righteous anger in order to give people an opportunity to repent and to receive his salvation.

So the way Paul uses the word in the passage we've just read (*Ephesians 4:1-6*) is fairly representative of what it's all about. It is used to indicate being patient with one another – longsuffering, forbearance, tolerance. The context in which Paul uses the word makes that clear, and it's brought out in some of the other translations of this verse. The *Good News Bible* amplifies it by saying, “*show your love by being tolerant with one another*”, and in Tom Wright's *New Testament for Everyone*, he renders it “*great-heartedness*”. Donald Guthrie, in his comments on the verse, writes that patience is “*a quality seen most vividly in a social context.*” Margaret Thatcher once said in an interview, “*I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end*”, which is not what it's all about, really!

Now, as we are so often pointing out, although we call ourselves followers of Jesus, although we identify ourselves as Christians, we are nonetheless still human and subject to all those emotions and temptations that are part of our fallen humanity. Try as we might to follow Jesus and put into practice all that he asks of us, let's be honest and recognise that we are still tempted and other people – other Christians – can still be a pain in the neck. In God's good scheme of things, the Church is an organisation where all kinds of different people are drawn together who maybe wouldn't otherwise have anything to do with each, and we can easily rub each other up the wrong way – usually just because that's the way we are; sometimes deliberately. So we need the kind of patience that one writer defined as “*the ability to put up with people you'd like to put down.*”

It doesn't necessarily come easily, does it? For some people that kind of easy-going tolerance and gentle longsuffering is part of their natural make-up and they manage to cope without too much difficulty, but for many people – including myself, I have to admit – it is astonishingly difficult and that is all too often far too obvious. So we need to do what Jesus told his disciples to do about love in John's Gospel and what James tells his readers to do about wisdom in his letter: we need to pray for God to help us. We need to recognise our shortcomings in this area, to repent of the damage we may already have done and ask God to give us more patience.

But, as with so many other aspects of our Christian lives, simply praying about something isn't necessarily the whole solution. We also need to work towards it ourselves. In every sense of the word, we need to **practise** our patience, to make a conscious effort to overcome our lack of it. Jesus told a parable about an unforgiving or impatient servant in *Matthew 18*. It's sometimes called “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant” and is about a man who owes the King a very large sum of money. When he is hauled up before the King, who wants the debt honoured, the man actually pleads with the King, “*Be*

patient with me.” The King is patient and cancels the debt out of pity for the man, who promptly goes out and demands a very small amount of money he is owed by a fellow-servant. The fellow-servant uses the same plea – “*Be patient with me*” – but to no avail and the first man is punished for his lack of patience. The interesting thing is that Jesus tells that story in the context of a conversation with his disciples in which he is telling them how to respond if someone wrongs them and tells Peter to forgive his brother “*seventy-seven times*” (Or possibly “*seventy times seven*”.)

You see, counting the number of times you forgive is a useful exercise, as is just counting to ten or whatever before you really let someone have it – or rather, in the hope that it doesn’t get that far. Someone once described patience as “*counting down without the blast off*”. There are all kinds of strategies you can employ to help you with this – counting, walking away and taking time to calm down, telling yourself that the person who has frustrated or upset you is also someone loved and cherished by God, thinking about how you’d feel if the boot was on the other foot – and so on. We really need to work towards the point where we simply refuse to yield to anger, refuse to let our temper get the better of us. As with so much else, it’s a question of putting things into perspective and having a look at the bigger picture. Now, they are all things you could specifically pray about, especially if you are aware that this is a problem for you.

And never forget that this is all part of your witness, part of your daily attempt to show to others what a life transformed by Jesus can look like. When we looked at the first aspect of this Fruit of the Spirit – love – we heard Jesus saying to his followers (*John 13:34,35*):

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Paul tells the Corinthian Christians in that great 13th chapter of his First Letter – the chapter all about love which we so often take to be all warm and fuzzy, but is, in fact, terribly hard and very direct – that “*love is patient*”. There’s no way you can truly be a disciple if you don’t show love. And there’s no way you can truly show love if you don’t demonstrate patience as part of it. That’s why Paul qualifies what he writes in the passage we read by saying, “*be patient, bearing with one another in love.*”

Now, as always, I am not saying this is easy – I’m painfully aware that it’s not – but we do need to work hard to try and make this a way of life, not just a character trait. And alongside that we need to pray – for ourselves and for one another – that we might become a community of people where all of us are “*patient, bearing with one another in love.*” With God’s help, may it be so.

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So the way Paul uses the word in *Ephesians 4:1-6* is fairly representative of what it's all about. It is used to indicate being patient with one another – longsuffering, forbearance, tolerance. The context in which Paul uses the word makes that clear, and that's brought out in some of the other translations of this verse.

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We need to pray for God to help us. We need to recognise our shortcomings in this area, to repent of the damage we may already have done and ask God to give us more patience.

And we also need to work towards it ourselves. In every sense of the word, we need to **practise** our patience, to make a conscious effort to overcome our lack of it. Look at *Matthew 18:21-35*. The interesting thing is that Jesus tells that story in the context of a conversation with his disciples in which he is telling them how to respond if someone wrongs them and tells Peter to forgive his brother "*seventy-seven times*".

And never forget that this is all part of your witness, part of your daily attempt to show to others what a life transformed by Jesus can look like. Remember what Jesus says in *John 13:34,35*. And Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 13* that "*love is patient*". There's no way you can truly be a disciple if you don't show love. And there's no way you can truly show love if you don't demonstrate patience as part of it. That's why Paul qualifies what he writes in the passage we read by saying, "*be patient, bearing with each other in love.*"

Questions for discussion

- 1) How would you define patience? Do you think you are a patient person?
- 2) What causes people to lose their patience? Do you think it is more of an issue in a culture that seems to be so concerned with immediacy and getting things done instantly?
- 3) In what ways is God's patience demonstrated?
- 4) What does Paul mean by "*bearing with one another in love*"? Do you think we do?

5) What can we do to help ourselves achieve patience?