

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

9. Gentleness

Ephesians 4:1-16

For those who are visiting us this morning – and for those who have simply forgotten – I should let you know that we are currently following a series on how we can best live a fruitful life as followers of Jesus, how we can offer in our community glimpses of the Kingdom of God as we try to live out its values day by day where we have been called to live and work and spend our time. Those qualities that should characterise our lives are described by the Apostle Paul as the “*Fruit of the Spirit*”.

Paul writes about these qualities to the Christian in Galatia, in his *Letter to the Galatians* chapter 5, and he contrasts them with what he calls “*the acts of the sinful nature*” – the things that we find ourselves doing which are part of our fallen and sinful humanity. The nine qualities which make up the fruit of the Spirit are the very opposite of those acts and are to be seen as an integral whole. This list of “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*” is not a menu from which we choose the ones we think we can cope with, nor is it a checklist that enables us to measure how good a Christian we are, but a single clump of qualities that should all be somehow exhibited in our lives day by day. We need to keep praying for the help of the Holy Spirit to show them in our lives, reflecting the character of the God whom we claim to serve and worship.

And those who have been listening over the past few weeks may well think we’ve spent more time learning about language than theology some of the time. We’ve encountered all sorts of issues of translation as we’ve reflected on these qualities that are to be the markers of our lives as people committed to live for Jesus. That happens again as we come to the penultimate word on this list – “*gentleness*”. If you were here last week when we looked at “*faithfulness*” and the decisions we had to make about which English word best conveys Paul’s Greek, you’ll know that we had to take all kinds of things into consideration. Well, when it comes to “*gentleness*” the great New Testament scholar Gordon Fee, no less, writes “*This is the one fruit, more than the others, for which one has difficulty finding an adequate English word.*” So we’re not going down the road of translation this morning, you’ll be pleased to hear. But we will have a very quick excursion into etymology, if that’s OK.

Etymology is about how words come to be used in different languages, where they come from and all that. Very quickly, the Greek word here is *praos* which becomes linked (in a way that I won’t bore you with today) to a Gothic, Germanic word “*frjon*”, which means “love” and from which we get our English word “*friend*”. So at the heart of this word translated “*gentleness*” is the idea of friendship. There’s a sense of it all being about acting friendly, mild, gentle.

In the Greek of Paul's day, it was a word that could be used of things – soothing words, mild medicines, gentle actions. When used of people it usually carried a sense of being benevolent or well-meaning. The great philosopher Aristotle used it as the mid-point between excessive anger and no anger at all, describing the kind of person who could be angry at the right time when injustice was being done or whatever, and was never angry at the wrong time, never lost his temper or flew into a rage. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas is best known for a couple of lines that exemplify that contrast: “*Do not go **gentle** into that good night./ Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*”

Which leads us to another use of the word which is perhaps the most appropriate here in trying to get to the heart of what Paul is trying to convey. It's the word used of a tame animal. Or rather – even more appropriately – of a **tamed** animal, an animal that has been brought under control: a horse that has been broken in, for example, or a dog that has been trained. In Paul's mind that may well have led him on as he was writing this list to the quality which we'll look at next week, the last on this list – “*self-control*”.

You see, the follower of Jesus – the one who is serious about living as he wants us to, about taking his teaching to heart, about accepting his invitation to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God – that person is someone who has been “tamed”. Those “*acts of the sinful nature*” – and particularly here, maybe, the “*selfish ambition*” and the “*fits of rage*” – are being brought under control by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. The person whose life displays *gentleness* is someone who is being humbled as they accept the will of God and follow the way of Christ. In fact, this word “*gentleness*” very often appears as part of a pair of words in the New Testament, as in the reading we had from *Ephesians 4* a few minutes ago. It's usually linked with “*humility*”.

Those “*acts of the sinful nature*” are all about self, about promoting oneself and one's own agenda for one reason or another. They're about people who are selfish, egocentric, wanting everything for their own use, seeking only their own pleasure – quite the opposite of those who display humility and gentleness. And it's a real struggle for most of us as we have those things boiling away in side of us, as our attitudes are shaped by a world in which individualism and competition are the foundations of our economic system and enshrined in public policy, as our thoughts are always to do with what we can get out of it, as we find ourselves in daily conflict with others who want the same for themselves.

And like all our attitudes, they burst out from time to time in words and in behaviour. We find those values, those ideals being verbalised in our criticisms and in our gossip and in our arguments; being displayed in our scheming and in our cheating and in our selection of priorities for our lives. It all rages away like a wild animal desperate to get out. That's why – as we are so often saying, and we need to keep saying until we really start to get it right – that's why Paul is so insistent that we do not “*conform*

any longer to the pattern of this world, but are transformed by the renewing of our minds”, by the conversion of our attitudes. You’ll never, ever get your behaviour right until you get your attitudes sorted out. We need that *gentleness* to help us tame it all. I use a daily pattern of prayer provided by The Community of St Chad and on one day of the week there is a prayer by Eusebius, a third century Father of the Church. It contains these lines, which I struggle with every time I say them (and those closest to me will understand!):

*“May I always keep **tame** that which rages within me.
May I accustom myself to be **gentle**,
And never be angry with people because of circumstances.”*

Once again, there’s that contrast between rage and gentleness. It points to that constant battle in which we are engaged, the battle between our fallen, sinful nature that is self-seeking and intemperate, and our new, transformed, Spirit-led, Spirit-filled self that is to model these values, to demonstrate these qualities. And don’t you find that that battle can be draining, even discouraging, as day by day we are trying to live it all out? It’s not easy, is it? We have to want to do it – it’s a choice, a decision – but even that can be hard. Another Welsh poet, the gloomy old poet-priest R S Thomas, writes in his 1968 poem *They* about his having to shake hands with people with a “*willed gentleness*”. And it’s not easy really to live out what we are supposed to be, to shine for Jesus in a world that has so many dark corners. That is because we try and do it all under our own strength – another aspect of our self-centred nature, I suppose: we’ve got to be seen to be succeeding on our own.

But that’s not the way of the Kingdom, is it? It’s not about sorting ourselves out, about achieving these Godly goals on our own. There is help. There’s help from Jesus. These are such familiar words maybe to many of us, but how much do we take them to heart?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus calls us to leave it with him, to come to him and submit to him and to allow him to lead us forward. Why? Because he himself is “*gentle and humble in heart*” – those two words again. Jesus has been there. Jesus has himself been able to tame those things which militate against the values of the Kingdom of God. As we reminded ourselves last week, Jesus submitted to his Father at that climactic, cosmic moment before his execution when he screamed out to his Father that he didn’t want to do this, but then said, “*Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.*”

And that, of course, led on to his astonishing death on the cross, a death in which he comprehensively defeated the forces of evil – not by playing them at their own game, but through his gentleness and humility. He acted as a lightning rod for all the evil in the cosmos, directing it away from us into his own

being and dealing with it once and for all. Then, a couple of days later, he was alive again – having dealt with not just evil but also death – speaking gently to Mary, dealing gently with a bunch of doubting disciples including Thomas, gently encouraging Peter to move on from the night in the High Priest’s courtyard and take responsibility for the continuing mission of the Kingdom. How could such a man **not** help us? He has experienced what we go through, but overcome it. He knows the frustration of living as a fragile, vulnerable human being in a broken and distorted world. But he has done something about it and offers you the opportunity to benefit from that.

If you are struggling to “*keep tame that which rages within you*” – and, let’s be honest, most of us are – whether it’s “*sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like*”, that list that Paul gives us in *Galatians 5* – then help is at hand. Jesus can help you. His Holy Spirit can work within you to cultivate that sense of *gentleness* that is indispensable to living the Christian life.

It’s a quality that is even to be part of our witness, a means of expressing something of the character of Christ in the very way we share the Gospel, as Peter writes in his First Letter: “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*” (*1 Peter 3:15*) This quality links in so well with all the others – with “*love, joy, peace*” and all the rest. Ask Jesus for his help in getting some of it and in demonstrating it in your life day by day. Stop trying to cope with the frustration of doing it all under your own steam and reach out for his help today.

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Those "*acts of the sinful nature*" are all about self, about promoting oneself and one's own agenda for one reason or another. It all rages away like a wild animal desperate to get out. A prayer by the 3rd century Christian Eusebius contains these lines:

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And never be angry with people because of circumstances."

It points to that constant battle in which we are engaged, the battle between our fallen, sinful nature that is self-seeking and intemperate, and our new, transformed, Spirit-led, Spirit-filled self that is to model these values, to demonstrate these qualities. But it is not easy because we try and do it all under our own strength. But there is help from Jesus. Look at *Matthew 11:28-30*.

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In his death on the cross, a death in which he comprehensively defeated the forces of evil – not by playing them at their own game, but through his gentleness and humility – Jesus acted as a lightning rod for all the evil in the cosmos, directing it away from us into his own being and dealing with it once and for all. Then, a couple of days later, he was alive again – having dealt with not just evil but also death – speaking gently to Mary, dealing gently with a bunch of doubting disciples including Thomas, gently encouraging Peter to move on from the night in the High Priest's courtyard and take responsibility for the continuing mission of the Kingdom. How could such a man **not** help us? He has experienced what we go through, but overcome it. He knows the frustration of living as a fragile, vulnerable human being in a broken and distorted world. But he has done something about it and offers you the opportunity to benefit from that.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) What do you think "*gentleness*" means? Where have you seen it in action?
- 2) In what way have followers of Jesus been "tamed"? Do you find that a helpful analogy?
- 3) We hear a lot today about "road rage" and the like. Do you think it is becoming more of a problem? Why/why not?
- 4) We have to make a decision to try and cultivate these qualities, including gentleness. How does that differ from trying to do it under our own steam?

5) Can we really leave it all to Jesus? Why/why not?