

Fruits of the Spirit in the character of Christians

A resource of 11 meditations

By Father Iain McKillop

Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
1. LOVE.....	5
2. JOY.....	7
3. PEACE.....	9
4. PATIENCE.....	11
5. KINDNESS.....	13
6. GOODNESS.....	15
7. FAITHFULNESS.....	17
8. GENTLENESS.....	19
9. SELF-CONTROL.....	21
CONCLUSION.....	23

INTRODUCTION

During this time of a health crisis there has rightly been much discussion of the psychological stress that people are experiencing. I thought it might be useful to consider our how working on the development of our Christian character might help both ourselves over this issue and support those around us. As we look towards celebrating Pentecost, I want to meditate through a series of brief studies on the *'fruit of the Spirit'*, as described in Galatians 5:22-3: *"Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control"*. I'm sure that these are not all the fruit that God's Spirit aims to develop in the lives of faithful followers of Christ's way. Spiritual Intuition and Understanding, Self-Knowledge, Wisdom, Creativity, Appreciation of Value, Obedient Response to God's Ways, Integrity, Honesty, Truthfulness, Trust, Trustworthiness and Security in Depth of Faith come to mind and I will mention a few others in my conclusion. Ephesians 5:22 talks of *'living by light'* and enlightenment' as spiritual fruit: *'the fruit of light is found in all that is good, right and true'*. Hebrews calls 'righteousness, peacefulness and true, effective witnessing' important aspects of our fruit [Heb.12:11; 13:15]. But the nine qualities of spiritual fruit in Galatians 5 are useful places to start as we try to follow the Creator's intention for human beings, emulate Christ and let God's Spirit work in us to form us into the fulfilled people we were created to be. At this time of lock-down, when we are perhaps turned in on ourselves more than at some other times it is useful to expand our vision of what we are and should be as faithful Christians. This may help us personally, but also help our ministry to others to be more effective and certainly could make church communities even more attractive and outgoing for the future.

'Fruit of the Spirit' describes the nature of the character and life that God intends to build in those who follow Christ and the way humans are intended to be. It has often been pointed out that while spiritual gifts listed in scripture are varied and given in different ways to us according to need, the complete 'fruit' of the Spirit is intended to be displayed by all Christians. 'Fruit' is a singular word in the passage: Unlike spiritual 'gifts' we are not intended to display just one or two fruit; all the fruit are meant to be visible in our lives holistically. St. Paul emphasises that not all believers teach, prophesy, heal, speak in spiritual tongues etc. [1Cor.12:4-11], yet all are meant to display the wholeness of the fruit of the Spirit [Gal.5:24]. This fruit is largely how the integrity and authenticity of our faith and lives is assessed by God and others: *"By their fruit you shall know them"*, said Jesus [Matt.7:16]. Frequently we assess people by the sort of person they are rather than what they do. Certainly we have learned that what people say and claim does not always prove true. No Christians should compete with one another to express more fruit than others or be conceited if we bear fruit. Nor should we envy those who are fruitful Christians, just learn from their example. We should expect such fruit to be developing in all, and encourage it in each other [Gal.5:25-6].

Fruit is a term that occurs fairly regularly in Jesus' teaching: *"Bear fruit worthy of repentance"* [Matt.3:8; 12:33]. Like a tree, we must *"bear good fruit not bad"* [Matt.3:10; 7:17-20; 12:33]; our lives must never be allowed to become fruitless [Matt.21:19]. In Luke Jesus is blessed as the 'fruit' of Mary's womb [Lk.1:42]. Through him we are *'gathering the fruit of eternal life'* [Jn.4:36]. *"A seed that falls to the ground"*... as in the benefits which grew through Jesus' death, *"dies and bears much fruit"* [Jn.12:24]. God prunes us, sometimes drastically, so that we are able *"to bear more fruit"* [Jn.15:22]; he appointed his disciples to *"go and bear fruit that will last eternally"* [Jn.15:16]. In the Book of Revelation the Tree of Life bears twelve types of fruit, one for every month, suggesting symbolically that what God gives us nourishes and is sufficient for all seasons and situations [Rev.22:2]. The fruit of the Spirit should therefore be helpful to us at this difficult time.

In times of self-reflection it is useful to contemplate how fruitful our lives and our faith have been so far, and to make determined decisions to continue to be fruitful as God's disciples. We should not over-blame ourselves for any failings so far but recognise these and act to remedy those failings in order to 'prune us' to be more effective and more fruitful followers of God's ways in the future. In this Spring season I'm watching the fruit trees and rose-bushes in my garden full of buds. I know that those that were pruned and nourished well will be really fruitful and strong later in the year. It is sobering to realise that those which I neglected or ignored will be more straggly and far less fruitful. It's the same with our own personal spirituality, areas of church-growth, and our witness. The fruit of the Spirit does not develop purely by the Spirit's work; it relies a lot on our own response and effort. 'Love', 'patience', 'kindness', 'goodness', 'faithfulness', 'gentleness' and 'self-control' especially require disciplined action by us. Even 'joy' and 'peace', though more internal, develop through feeling that we may have been obedient, and allowing God to influence and warm us. The development of the Spirit's fruit is a joint work between God and ourselves, part of our covenant relationship.

The more we develop the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives the more we will reflect the character of Christ. If you look through the life of Jesus, his love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control were not expressed effately, naively or simplistically. He was strong, practical, active and effective in working to heal, restore and develop the world. We live in a society that often encourages more dominating characteristics like self-promotion and advance, self-sufficiency, insistence on personal rights, belligerent determination and self-protection, sometimes at the expense of others. While mistrusting aggressive and despotic leadership we also admire more humble service, like that of many medical staff and social or charity and industrial workers at present, who are being applauded as heroes for keeping society going at their own expense. But the humble are not rewarded as generously as those who work in corporate finance or even politics. That will have to wait for the Kingdom of God to be more effectively established: "*blessed are the meek...*" etc. [Matt.5:3ff]. The fruit of the Spirit has a more just perspective, showing that our character and self-giving nature is more important than our social or financial position.

At this vulnerable time for our world and the community around us, we can have a potentially fruitful effect on the people and society in which we live. We have the ability to spread love, peace, kindness and even a sense of inner joy, where the news is so depressing and many are feeling isolated. We can help people learn patience, gentleness, goodness faithfulness and self-control, where so much around us is frustrated, challenged and suffering. The fruit of the Spirit is important in our own lives, to help us withstand the deprivations, problems and issues within a world that is socially distancing. But it can also bring fruit into the lives of others to nourish, sustain and help them grow themselves.

It is a useful exercise to consider the character of Christians who you admire, and to try to add to the list of fruit which God's Spirit develops in the lives and character of Christians. Remember that the fruit are characteristics which we would expect to find in *all* followers of Christ, unlike individual gifts. Exploring the value and character of faithful believers can help to challenge and expand our own discipleship.

1. LOVE

In the early days of the Covid 19 crisis I spent a lot of time considering and writing about the foundations of my 'faith and hope' and how trust in Christ can help us in our vulnerable situation. Meditating on those two words led me to recognise a relevant aspect of St. Paul's writings that I had not previously considered. In 1 Corinthians 13 he wrote that three things survive eternally: "*Faith, Hope and Love... and the greatest of these is Love*". It's such a beautiful, well known, poetic passage, but the primacy of love over faith and hope is perhaps not just in the beauty with which it cements our relationship to others and to God. Perhaps the spirit of love in us awakens us to be able to appreciate better all about life and God. Love may encourage faith and hope. I used to find it hard to believe that God could care for me as much as for others, because I was so aware of my personal failings and weaknesses. It was only when I found myself loved by a person who actually valued me despite, or in some cases because of my weaknesses and failings that I began to recognise that God could love me even better. My faith and life grew stronger as a result. If we have love inside us it can awaken us to values in ourselves and others that we previously devalued or took for granted.

There are of course many different kinds of love: I love close friends slightly differently from family; animals and pets differently from humans, my congregation differently from my wider community, chocolate differently from a succulent meal. The Bible, we know, uses various words to distinguish some of these different forms of love: *philadelphia* - 'brotherly or sisterly love and friendship', *stergo* - affection as between parents and children', *agape* - 'self-giving even sacrificial love', *eros* - 'passionate, sensual love'. There were also individual terms for 'love of nation', 'generosity of giving'. Yet despite this variety, there is a basic warm feeling of wellbeing towards all that we love in any way: all the terms for love involve care and self-giving for another. The sense of loving or having loved expands our spirits. Love enlarges our ability to feel; it can energise us and warm us with good, even if we are temporarily separated or even bereaved and remembering those we have loved.

The word used in the Galatians 5 passage is '*agape*', the self-giving love that Jesus demonstrated, and encouraged in his followers. True love is not self-centred or out to primarily satisfy itself; it concentrates on others and longs for their good. That is why 1Cor.13 is so often read at weddings, to remind us all of the outreaching rather than inward-looking, self-satisfying qualities of love: "*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things, loves all things. Love never ends...*" [1Cor.13:4-7]. (It is noticeable that most of the qualities expressed here resemble the 'fruit of the Spirit'.) Of course, in expressing and receiving love we partly satisfy ourselves, but that is not the main objective of true love, which seeks and does the best for the other. "*Greater love has no-one that this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" [Jn.15:13]. The nature of God's love for us among all his creation was a major theme of Jesus' teaching. Jesus exemplified God's perfect love, in giving himself. That sort of love expects nothing that can balance it in return or repayment. God may desire our love and our obedience but the love poured out on the Cross did not demand our response, though God must surely long for it. God's love perhaps resembles that of a lover longing for the object of their love to recognise and respond with love in return. This is beautifully expressed by the metaphor of God as a lover in Hosea longing for the faithful return of his love, or in Isaiah 54:5-8 promising fruitful abundance to his wife.

We are in a society where many see their right as being to 'take' without feeling a commensurate responsibility to 'give'. The saddest forms of love are those which just want self-satisfaction or those which continue frustratingly to long for the impossible. This is lust or longing, not true love. Too

frequently sexual love, love of money, power or position aim to get what one can without giving sufficiently in return. That is also true of some people's feelings about the society in which they live: getting without giving. Sometimes that is reflected in spiritual relationships with God too: Many want the emotional satisfaction which comes through spirituality or which is received in a worship service, without feeling reciprocal responsibility to give to God or to others. Far too many books on esoteric spirituality just focus on satisfying oneself. Yet true spirituality, like true love is about both giving and receiving, where "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" [Acts 20:35].

Jesus's challenge to love goes beyond 'easy love': He expects us to "*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" [Matt.5:44]; to "*lay down one's life for one's friends*" [Jn.15:13], to "*give one's life for the unrighteous*" [Rom.5:8ff], to work hard at our relationship with God and others. Only that way will we ever fully understand the extent of God's own energetic, self-giving love for all that has been made, including sinners and failures. Many in society love and indulge themselves excessively, but many others indulge themselves through lack of self-love. Commercialism has encouraged us to compare ourselves with others even more than in the past when the commandment recognised that we should 'not covet what our neighbour has', and 'should love our neighbour as ourselves'. The Hebrew concept of neighbour mostly implied responsibility towards those who were of the same nation, even though God's laws told them to support the stranger. The Parable in the Good Samaritan [Lk.10:25-37] shows that Christ expanded the concept of love to embrace all. At this time when many in society are experiencing trials and many are lonely, it is increasingly important that we recognise that ALL our neighbours are to be loved and supported.

2. JOY

Jesus prayed for his followers in Gethsemane, “...that my joy may be in them.” How strange that, in the depths of his Passion, joy should be on his mind! Similarly it is difficult to consider joy in the midst of the present health crisis. Joy certainly seems to have been in the hearts of Jesus’ followers as they paraded him through the streets as he entered Jerusalem at the beginning of that last week. Jesus’ own emotions on the day we commemorate as ‘Palm Sunday’ must have been extremely mixed as he approached the climax of his mission. ‘Joyful’ in its modern usage is not an emotion one might consider as the main emotion in Jesus. I can imagine him enjoying the Cana wedding [Jn.2:1-11], celebrating religious festivals (despite recognising some hypocrisy there), laughing in the company of close friends and disciples, celebrating after a miracle of healing, joy in personal times of worship, delighting in the natural or rural world he described in his parables. But he was also ‘*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*’ [Isa.53:3]. He was not morose yet serious, determined, frustrated in mission, content in his relationship with his Father God, so the ‘joy’ he mentions must have been deeper than a bubbly surface emotion. His love for people and his relationship with his Father seem to have given him special delight. The Psalms sing of ‘*delighting to do God’s will*’ [1:2; 16:3; 112:1; 119:16ff.].

The main word for ‘Joy’, found in Galatians 5 and repeatedly in Matthew, Luke and especially John’s Gospel is ‘*chará*’, which denotes ‘delighting’, ‘rejoicing’. It is linked to the word ‘*cháris*’, which implied ‘practical, outreaching love and grace’. The ‘joy’ which Jesus knew and which the writer of Galatians is encouraging us to develop is therefore part of God’s divine, outgoing loving nature towards all things as shown in Jesus. In difficult circumstances this can speak to us: we may not be in an obviously happy state yet we can still feel and experience deep inner joy through our spiritual security in accepting God’s love and care for us and through loving what is around us.

Happiness partly depends on our personal character, background and circumstances. Some people are naturally melancholic, or have physical, medical or emotional reasons for a tendency towards depression. Others are more naturally bouncy and seem to express joy or live in a more carefree way. We cannot always help our melancholia, though indulging it can be draining. Yet people who are over-effusively joyful can also be exhausting to be with. Whatever our personality or circumstances the spiritual fruit of joy can reach in to even difficult circumstances, refresh and help to transform us. Spiritual joy can help us be more stable in our personalities, and also help us be easier to live with. Spiritual joy does not depend so much on our personal situation, but recognises that we can be secure in God’s love and care, in whatever position we find ourselves. St. Paul talks about this in 2 Cor.12:9-10 where he speaks of being content with his weaknesses, hardships and persecutions, as they made him rely more on Christ. Philippians 4:11 says “*I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty... I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” Hebrews 13:5-6 continues this idea: “*be content with what you have, for God has said “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”*”

Many people are very active in our over-busy world, yet feel no joy in their work, their relationships, possessions or the rat-race of life. You may gain everything you ever thought you wanted but not have deep inner satisfaction. Inner joy can only be ‘whole’ when our lives are whole and balanced, physically, spiritually and socially. The tragic film character Citizen Kane built around him everything that money could buy, but achieved no joy. We see recognise in several historical characters and some sad contemporary lives.

When we hold up to God in thought and prayer the people, events and thoughts about which we most care, we can experience joy, even when praying for difficulties they may be experiencing or feeling distance and separation from them. Joy, like love, isn't focused on 'us' or on what selfishly makes us happy or satisfies the self; it comes most in reaching out. Jesus' joy, which he prayed might be in his disciples, was the joy of being secure in his loving relationship with God, caring for and loving his companions, and knowing he was doing the right things in life. Jesus also talks about us being able to bring joy to the spiritual world: "*there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*" [Lk.15:7]. The joy of creation, sung about in many Psalms, and the joy of heavenly powers, is perhaps related to us fulfilling our role in the harmony of the cosmos.

Spiritual joy, therefore, need not be as dependent on circumstances or personality as is general happiness. If we are able to help ourselves, and the people to whom we minister, to recognise that we have security in God's presence with us, we can know an inner warmth, even in vulnerable times, which can help to sustain us. We should not over-push our personal joy onto people who are undergoing difficulties, for we might seem uncaring, naïve or not empathetic to their situation. Life is truly hard for many, yet in faith and in closeness to God we can discover a contentment that can form an inner joy. This might not be bubbling in rejoicing, (nor should it be in tragic circumstances like those of today,) but it can strengthen us. As Psalm 23 reminds us: "*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death (or the darkest valley) I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.*" The joy that God's Spirit can build in us is not necessarily surface happiness, but can bring an inner sense of warmth and peace that sustains and strengthens.

3. PEACE

The present health crisis has encouraged many in British society to support one another wonderfully. It is heartening to hear of so many acts of benevolence, companionship and self-sacrificial help of others, even of strangers. Sadly we also hear of increased abuse of the vulnerable, thieves exploiting the situation, some spreading and responding violently to false rumours and civil disruption in America. But in general, and certainly in the community around me here, I've seen so much friendship and peace displayed between many who previously might have been more private. Strangers acknowledge one another from a distance in the street and wish each other well. Ephesians 2:13-19 reminds us that the Church is comprised of many who would normally be divided, yet are now united and brought peace in Christ's body.

When Jesus talks about 'peace' he was meaning far more than lack of discord or warfare. (Sadly too often discord still persists in many church bodies or between individual Christians!) Spiritual 'peace' includes unity, valuing one another, acceptance of difference, mutual support and working together, a sense of inner contentment and contentment with others. It involves learning to be satisfied with ourselves, our circumstances, our companions, our ministry and our environment. Spiritual peace needs to be a truthful awareness of being at peace, rather than being blinkered to problems or deliberately avoiding or ignoring disquieting issues.

The opening and sometimes the ending of most New Testament Epistles nearly always includes the joint blessing of '*grace and peace be with you*' [Rom1:7; 1Cor.1:3 etc.]. Sometimes the term 'mercy' is added [1&2Tim.; 2Jn.; Jude]. Ancient Roman greetings and prayers of blessing offered people "Peace" / 'Pax' or to be embraced by the security of the '*Pax Romana*'. Rabbis more often prayed the blessing of '*Grace from God*', though 'Peace'/'*shalom*' is an important Jewish concept, translated into the Greek Bible as '*eirene*'. Peace originated with the idea of a treaty, the absence of hostile feelings between people, tribes, nations or the covenant agreement between God and people. It brought security, even redemption, all of which relate to God's promises to his people. The coming Messiah would be the '*Prince/King of Peace*' [Isa.9:5; Zech.9:9-10] establishing an eternal, paradisaic '*shalom*'. As the means by which God establishes peace: "*He is our peace*" [Mic.5:5].

The Hebrew concept of '*shalom*' is expansive; it meant overall 'wellbeing': health, good fortune, stability, national and personal prosperity, peace within the community. It especially meant being in stable relationship with God, who would provide these holistic blessings. Unlike many of their Jewish contemporaries, Jesus and St. Paul did not regard material prosperity as important as a sign of blessing. They recognised the difficulties and inequality of human life. Yet God would bring peace, truth and equity with the coming of the Kingdom for which Christ was working: The 'poor' and 'persecuted' would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, the 'meek' would inherit the earth, those 'hungry for righteousness' would be filled, the 'peacemakers' would be called Children of God [Matt.5:3-11]. So people would find God's blessing of peace in response to their needs. Paul could write that in the midst of hardship, poverty, or with his '*thorn in the flesh*' he had learned to be content and at peace [Phil.4:11-12; 2Cor.12:10]. The Epistle to the Hebrews encourages us to '*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have*' [Heb.13:5].

For Jesus and for Paul, 'peace' was a universal wish for God's people. Jesus encouraged his disciples to give a blessing of peace to the homes of all who welcomed them hospitably in their mission [Matt.10:12-14]. But he also recognised that his teaching would separate some and cause hostility and division rather than unity and universal peace. "*I have come not to bring peace but a sword*" is a

difficult passage [Matt.10:24]. Jesus' mission intended peace not division, but he recognised that others, both individuals and powers, had different priorities. The present divisions in churches have various causes: obstinacy over variant interpretations of doctrine or scripture, preferential practices, self-centredness, power-struggles, dysfunctional or clashing personalities etc. Jesus reminded us that a city or nation divided cannot be at peace [Matt.12:25; Mk.3:24-5], and the body of Christ cannot work effectively as it should if its members are not working fully in peace, harmony and support of one another [1Cor.1:13; 12:12-27]. Perhaps this time of enforced contemplation and isolation might be a perfect period for reflecting on the things in ourselves and in relationship with others that disturb or destroy our peace and work to resolve them.

Jesus wanted to bring peace with God and peace between people: *'Be at peace among one another'* [Mk.9:50]. He achieved spiritual peace for the world through the offering of his life, particularly through the Cross [Rom.5:11; Eph.2:14]. Jesus encouraged his followers to be 'one' with each other as he and his Father were one [Jn.17:] *'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you'* [Jn.14:27]. Expressing and sharing that peace and unity should act as a witness to the world. His prayer included: *"As you Father are in me and I in you, may they also be in us so that the world may see that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one."* [Jn.17:21-22]. The present witness of all churches and Christians falls far short of this glory, even when religious communities are at peace with one another. What might we do to witness more authentically and have greater personal peace and spiritual peace between each other and within all churches?

The spiritual fruit of peace in us should help us feel inner harmony as well as enable us to live and work at harmony with others. Finding spiritual peace within ourselves, within the community of Christians and feeling at peace with God is a fruit that would be so useful to share with the world at this time when many feel socially discontent, afraid, vulnerable and sometimes angry. Jesus recognised that being 'peacemakers' is a 'blessed' activity [Matt.5:9]. Christians should have more reason than many to discover this peace within ourselves, in our relationship with a God of Peace and a Saviour who has brought the possibility of peace. We have this peace to share. *"Peace be with you"* is an essential part of Jesus' message.

4. PATIENCE

The form of patience included in the list of fruit in Galatians 5 has a slightly different focus from the patience of character which we usually consider. The word for patience used here [*makrothymía*] is also translatable as ‘longsuffering’, ‘endurance’, ‘resignation’, ‘enforced or desperate acceptance’, ‘forbearance’. So it refers particularly to the way that we face difficulties, problems, suffering, or difficult people. This was important for surviving situations of persecution or rejection of Christians in the early church. It can also relate to our attitude to ourselves: how patient are we with our problems, bodies, minds, personal issues or lack of spiritual progress. Patient forbearance can help us stay strong amid the frustrations of the present lock-down and health and national issues.

In the Hebrew Scriptures ‘patience’ was often used of God’s gracious restraint in judgement on sin or those who opposed his way. God’s patience with humanity showed God’s faithfulness to covenant promises. The purpose of divine patience with people was to encourage them to recognise their failings and turn to righteous ways. The writings of several Rabbis contrast the ‘forbearance’ of parents towards wayward children to encourage them to develop their better character, with ‘indulgence’, which can damage their character. God’s grace and mercy does not indulge us, so we should not indulge ourselves. Jesus spoke of the patience and endurance of God in some of his parables. The father of the Prodigal Son was patient but suffering while his son was away, whereas the brother showed no forbearance when the prodigal returned in repentance [Lk.15:11-32.]. A king shows forbearance towards the debt of his servant, but the servant shows less forbearance towards his fellows [Matt.18:23-35]. In Col.1:11 and 2Tim.3:10 patient endurance and long suffering are regarded as strengthening us personally for the challenges of life and faith; Eph.4:2 shows that they strengthen the Church community.

Longsuffering patience in the Bible does not imply that the one who demonstrates it is complacent, irresolute or simply swayed by emotion or empathy. It aims for the improvement or development of the people or situation towards which patience is shown. It gives time for people to recognise their failings, learn, repent and bring change. Thus it shows practical love towards them and allows the one who is patient to also develop and change - something at which the brother of the Prodigal Son failed. Recognising God’s patience and forbearance towards us in the character of Christ should help us develop similar patience towards others. Such patience should be holy and humble, not self-righteous, developing steadfastness of faith in us. Patience aims to bring about justice and truth without seeking vengeance or using anger incorrectly.

Patience is perhaps the fruit which we learn most through having to endure it. I’ve found myself feeling impatient with people who do not learn from their mistakes, who regularly return to the same failings or sins, despite knowing that they have made them miserable in the past or do not grow in faith as they should after years of church attendance and declarations of faith. Then I look at myself and realise that I fail in exactly the same ways. I realise how far I am from the Christian who I should be, and that I am more culpable than others, since as a minister I am supposed to know more about my faith than some and have made professions and vows to be holy. I recognise how patient God is with me, so why am I often impatient with others!? I identify so often with St. Paul’s impatience with himself, though Paul was of course a FAR better Christian than me!: *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the things I hate... For I delight in the law of God in my inner self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin... wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* Thankfully

his next sentence is “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!...*” [Rom.7:21-25], in which he recognises that Jesus has the power to be our rescuer and forgiver!

There are some Christians to whom I could never confess because their response to sin or emotional or spiritual struggles seems inhuman or cold. Some can't seem to accept the failings of others. Think of those who denounce sin coldly from the pulpit, in street-preaching or on the media. Intolerance is the opposite of patience, and is often hypocritical, not recognising or acknowledging the log in our own eye! [Matt.7:3-5]. A value in knowing that Christ is the one who intercedes for us is found in trusting that he understands what we are going through and empathises with us. Hebrews affirms that we have in the heavens a “*great High Priest*” who is able to “*sympathise with our weaknesses*”... “*one who in every way has been tested as we are yet without sin...*” A true priest “*is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward because he himself is subject to weakness.*” [Heb.4:14- 5:2]. As we come to understand ourselves we should emulate Christ by our patience with others, since we recognise the limitations of our own nature and actions and empathise with theirs.

There is a great difference between being patient and being ‘laissez-faire’, nonchalant or indifferent to things that are wrong. Recently churches have been criticised for their failure to deal sufficiently with internal failings, abuses or for not speaking out prophetically against failings in the nation or international, environmental or financial issues and problems. As so many of the Hebrew prophets and Christ himself remind us, we have a responsibility to speak truth to power and act for the good of God's world. In the present crisis the national church has been offering help and keeping spiritual services alive, though at a distance, yet has been noticeably quiet in calling the government to account for weaknesses in planning and provision. Should we have been a more ‘prophetic voice’ or has it been right to be patient in order to keep people calm at a time of vulnerability? Would it be right to then challenge and consider blame at a later time? The wisdom of spiritual patience in any situation finds the right time to act, intervene, speak out or remain silent. All of these are possible ways to be true to Christ in various issues in life.

5. KINDNESS

We often use the word ‘kind’ to just mean mildly benevolent. But the word ‘kindness’ [*crēstótēs* in Greek], as used in the context of Galatians 5, has a much more powerful intention. It meant ‘excellent’, ‘true’, ‘a good example of its kind’, ‘genuine’, ‘useful’, ‘honest’, ‘morally upright’, ‘worthy’, ‘respectable’, ‘good-hearted’, ‘following the righteousness and goodness of activity of God’. The Greek word is used to translate several Hebrew terms that described the way God demonstrates his majesty and care towards human beings. God was described as ‘kind’ many times in the Hebrew Scriptures: [e.g. Ps.18:50; Isa.54:8; Jer.9:24]. He directed the growth of his people and “*led them with the cords of human kindness*” [Hos.11:4]. He shows kindness and grace even towards those who are ungrateful [Lk.6:35; Rom.11:22]. His divine kindness allows space for repentance and change [Rom.2:4]. 1Pet.2:3 quotes Psalm 34:8, relating God’s kindness to that of Christ in his saving of humankind: “*You have tasted the kindness of the Lord.*”

Christians in exhibiting this form of kindness as part of their character are examples of Christ-likeness, reflecting the character of God in the ways that are most appropriate to the lives and situations in which we live. Romans 3:12 quotes Psalm 14:1 to show that kindness as a human attribute should reflect God’s kindness. Kindness, like love, reflects the true nature, character and message of God to others. Our kindness is therefore a sign of the genuineness, authenticity and sincerity of our faith and discipleship; it is an essential part of our witness. Ephesians 4:32 reminds us that Christ’s kindness should be reflected in the relationships of all Christians to each other: “*Be kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.*” This means far more than just having a kindly disposition towards our neighbour. It works positively for the benefit of others.

Such true kindness is quite a contrast to hard-hearted expressions of faith, which too quickly condemn people with whom they disagree, criticise those who they regard as sinners, or hell-fire-and-damnation preaching that does not express humanity or divine understanding towards others. Christians should always be morally upright, set righteous examples and have a responsibility to be a prophetic voice, challenging what is wrong in society and individual lives. But we should do it with a kindness and winsomeness that resemble the qualities, mercy and grace of God. Those who condemn unkindly reflect a wrathful power that is very different from the caring, loving God and understanding Father that Jesus taught and exemplified. Romans 2:4 stresses that God’s kindness towards us is intended to lead us to repentance. Condemning people outright, trying to frighten them into the Kingdom of Heaven and not valuing them as God does, are not the best ways of encouraging people to see light, recognise the attractiveness of a relationship with God, or change their ways. It is far better to treat all with respect and care, pointing attractively to the fulfilling and abundant ways of righteous and spiritual life offered by true Christianity. Christ did give warnings, and expressed anger, at religious hypocrisy especially, but his character, words and activities attracted many. Kindness, like the love it reflects, is an attractive quality.

When Jesus said that his ‘*yoke is easy and his burden is light*’ [Matt.11:30], the word translated as ‘easy’ is again ‘*crēstós*’. The phrase in this context means: “my yoke is kind” in the way described above. In the responsibilities and mission with which God entrusts us, we are intended to reflect and exemplify the divine character authentically in our lives and ministry. That is often demanding and challenging work but not intended to be oppressive or burdensome. We are not meant to be mild, mediocre, simpering or pliable in the nondescript way that ‘kind’ and ‘nice’ are often used today. But neither are we to act in the oppressive, dominant way that some Christian institutions and leaders may

have done in the past. God-like kindness is, as Ted Hughes wrote of the Cross “*the power of power unexercised.*” The word ‘kind’ is used in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers to describe the saving work of Christ and God’s activity in creating, sustaining and redeeming the cosmos, bringing it to consummation in the Kingdom. In taking up the Christian ‘yoke’ in our baptismal vows, we make a covenant promise to be physically and energetically involved in this mission. By showing God’s kindness we are part of the healing restoring, sustaining and redeeming of the world that Jesus gave his life to save and which God is transforming into his Kingdom.

This is relevant in many ways to the present crisis in the health of people and the ecological crisis in the world. When Teresa of Avila said “*God had no hands or feet but yours, no ears and eyes but yours; yours are the hands that offer his love... etc.*” she was not implying in any way that God may be impotent to act in the world. She was asking us to recognise the loving responsibility with which God entrusts us to serve the world and give Christ’s message and kindness to the world in God’s name, reflecting God’s truth and character. In being ‘kind’ we are bringing God’s Spirit and presence to others. This is a complex and responsible task but it shows the trust and abilities with which God has gifted us as his people and his Church. As the ‘body of Christ’ we are spiritually and physically meant to be an active part of God’s own active kindness towards the world, There is no better time to show this than when people are experiencing crises. We can express God’s kindness, truthfulness, genuineness, usefulness, honesty and practical loving care in so many ways. God’s kindness, like his love does not expect anything in return. Yet through reflecting his love we may contribute to a change in the ways that people regard God, Christ, the Church and the Christian way of life.

6. GOODNESS

In our normal English usage, ‘goodness’, like ‘kindness’ and ‘gentleness’, are rather non-descript, general words but the intentional meaning of each word in scripture is far stronger. Goodness here: ‘*agathōsynē*’ means the highest form of good, something that is not just serviceable, but of real practical and effective use, of great value to God and to all. It does not carry as much of a moral meaning as the term used for ‘kindness’, but has the connotation that we are intended to be noble, healthy, strong, beautiful and valuable in every way. Plato believed that such goodness should be the goal of all action and behaviour. Goodness was believed to evoke a state of moral, intellectual and religious wellbeing in others.

Goodness in the Hebrew Scriptures is a characteristic of God, and in people it was regarded as a gift of God that reflected the nature of the God who formed it in us or through us [Gen.3:5]. In the New Testament goodness flows from God to the believer through Christ, whose nature is good. In Romans Paul emphasised that “*In everything God works for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose*” [Rom.8:28]. This may not always be apparent, as in present-day crises, but our own goodness and good actions should be reflecting the nature of God’s outgiving goodness towards others. Christ “*created us for good works*” [Eph.2:10] and we are exhorted to “*bear fruit in good works*” [Col.1:10]. This includes “*good and fitting behaviour*” [Rom.15:14; 2Thess.1:11]. The goodness in our behaviour is regarded as a sign that we belong to Christ and acts as a witness to others [1Pet.3:16, 21], a sign that Christ’s Spirit is developing fruit within us. We are promised that “*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ*” [Phil.1:6]. So though we may be very aware of our sins and failings in the present, we are assured that God will not let go until he has formed us more completely into Christ’s likeness [Rom.8:29; Phil.3:21].

Most people, if you ask them to define what God should be like would probably include ‘goodness’ as a major characteristic. But we live in a world that is regularly disillusioned. People have learned by experience or repute to distrust politicians, bankers, commerce, the media, religions, and even, sadly, church leaders. We therefore have a harder mission to convince the world of the truth and value of Christ’s gospel than at any time since the persecutions encountered by early churches. It is partly the worldwide Church’s fault, since we are often far from reflecting the nature of God. We do not sufficiently resemble what Christ revealed and taught. Could you truly say of yourself or any Christian you know that they are “*perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect?*” [Matt.5:48]. Or do most Christian organisations or groups honestly appear to strive towards that as their goal?

The principles of ‘goodness’: striving achieve the highest form of good, and being of real use and value to God and to all, should lead the church to seem ‘noble’, ‘healthy’, ‘strong’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘valuable’ in every way. Churches may strive for high a degree of excellence in their music, liturgy and preaching as their human abilities and resources will allow. We may look after our buildings and finances. But each individual Christian’s personal discipleship and knowledge of faith is rarely so determinedly striving towards the highest form of good. We often allow ourselves to get away with a mediocrity of faith and discipleship, which we would not accept in other areas of our lives or work. Paul talks of “*striving*” in his mission; in his letters the prayers for those to whom he ministers impress one by his sense of commitment and care for them. He talks of training himself in holiness and mission like an athlete subjecting his body to intense training to win the prize of salvation for himself as well as others [1Cor.9:24-27]. Similarly he spoke of making our bodies and our lifestyles, like our worship, as a “*sacrifice worthy and acceptable to God.*” [Rom.12:1; Phil.4:18]. This is taken

up in Eph.5:2 and 1Pet.2:5. The highest form of love and care given by God deserves and should receive the highest form of discipleship and worship in response.

We may have God's Spirit alive inside us as believers, but we are often leaking vessels and need constant refreshment and refilling. Ps.34:8 calls us to '*Taste and see that the Lord is good*'; Heb.6:4-5 and 1Pet.2:3 talk of us having "*tasted the goodness of the Lord*." The more we remind ourselves of what has been achieved for us, the more likely we are to respond to the goodness of that taste, like savouring and appreciating a fine wine. Jesus criticised the religion of his day as having lost its useful qualities "*like salt that had lost its taste*" [Matt.5:13; Mk.9:50; Lk.14:34]. "*How*", he asks, "*can it be made good again?*" That was the purpose of his ministry, which we now are meant to continue. We are to be "*salt to the earth*" and bring restoration towards the highest form of good.

7. FAITHFULNESS

Faithfulness [*pistis*] does not just refer to the extent of our faith and beliefs, or our faithfulness to God or other people. It is a wider term, implying that all these qualities grow from the authenticity of our relationship and commitment to God and others. The God to whom Jesus witnessed and exemplified was a force who could be trusted because God was powerful enough for anything, personally cared about Creation, especially human beings and especially those with whom covenant promises had been made. Jesus emphasised that although God had contracted covenant promises with the Jewish people, a close relationship with God was not exclusive to the Jews and he commended the faith of several gentiles like the Roman centurion [Matt.8:10; Lk.7:9; Jn.12:20;]. Most of the worldwide Church now consists of gentile Christians who have been brought into God's covenant relationship [Heb. 8&9; Eph.2:12 and Gal.3:17]. The trust relationship with God that Christ introduced is available for all. His 'Great Commission' to his followers before leaving earth was for us to teach that faith to all nations and baptise believers into it [Matt.28:19]. Faithfulness includes being faithful to that call. Christ commends 'trustworthiness' in God's servants: [Matt.25:21-23; Lk.19:17].

We live in a fairly untrusting world, amid many untrustworthy situations and untrustworthy institutions. It was probably worse for the ordinary people to whom Jesus ministered. In the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly in Psalms, people's faith convinced them that they could put their trust in God. In the Gospels Jesus often encouraged people to have 'faith' in God and in him: "*have faith and do not doubt... Ask in prayer with faith*" [Matt.21:21-22]; : "*According to your faith let it be done to you*" [Matt.9:29]; "*if you had faith the size of a grain of mustard seed...*" [Lk.17:6]; "*Your faith has saved you*" [Lk.7:50; 18:42]. This word '*pistis*' was not confined to religious beliefs; it primarily meant 'firmly persuaded', 'assured', 'convinced that something or someone is trustworthy'. Surprisingly neither words for 'trust' nor 'faith' are used in John's Gospel, where the divinity of Christ is most strongly represented. Instead the writer emphasises 47 times that his testimony is 'true' [Jn.19:35; 21:24], giving proofs of Christ's miraculous nature to encourage faith in one who taught and exemplified truth and perfectly reflected a trustworthy God.

In the Synoptic Gospels 'faith' and 'trust' are almost synonymous and often translate the same word. 'Faith' there has little to do with the abstract set of convictions, beliefs or doctrines that churches now define as 'the faith of the Church'. Scriptural faith is the trust that relates us to God. When Thomas recognised the risen Christ, his trust in the experience expanded his faith to believe not just that Jesus was alive, but he took the further leap of faith to proclaim Jesus as "*my Lord and my God!*" [Jn.20:28]. We should be wary of requiring experiences before we believe. Since the Enlightenment, that has been a major stumbling-block to belief. Jesus told Thomas "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*" [Jn.20:29]. Yet it is encouraging when we do recognise evidences and answers to prayer that encourage and strengthen our faith. At the heart of Christianity is belief in a spiritual truth and security which we cannot prove, yet strongly sense that we can trust: '*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the knowledge of things unseen*' [Heb.11:1].

If we create a living, active, trusting, spiritually truthful church we can exemplify faith to outsiders more than a body which keeps its faith to itself. In a sceptical world it is challenging to make our lives, community, liturgy and witness truly reflect the true God. We have to overcome years of unfortunate experiences by our truthful witness, but thankfully God is far more effective in convicting, trustworthy and powerful than human failure. Tales of saints include some who 'trusted God to provide everything they needed.' Jesus encouraged his followers (first the twelve disciples [Matt.10:5-14, then seventy [Lk.10:1-20], then us [Matt.28:18-20] to trust God for their support and

effectiveness when he sent them out on mission. In a modern economic world this may not be practical. St. Paul trusted God and believers to help support of his mission but he also worked at a profession in order not to be a burden to any [Acts 18:3; 2Cor.12:14; 1Thess.2:9; 2Thes.3:8]. He urged other Christians to act in the same way, so that church might support those with true needs [1Tim.5:16]. We should never believe that just because we have faith God will look after us and answer all our prayers and needs, despite Jesus' teaching about '*faith as small as a grain of mustard seed*' [Matt.17:20]. God's wisdom always answers prayer in the ways that are ultimately right and best for all. Our own work is usually art of the answer to our prayers.

The disciples trusted God to help people listen and respond to their message, to convert and work miracles through them. But they did not always find it easy. In one struggle with the cure of a child Jesus showed them that they did not have the spiritual power in themselves and were always dependant on God's will. The child's father, when asked whether he believed a cure possible, gave one of the most poignant, meaningful responses about trusting God in all scripture: "*I believe, help my unbelief!*" [Mk.9:24]. Perhaps that should be our prayer far more often, where we, as modern, thinking believers feel tempted not to pray for situations which we believe are beyond even God's intervention, rather like present crises. Jesus talked about '*the prayer of faith*' to which he assured people God would respond [Matt.21:22]. However we know from experience that not all prayers, especially those for healing, are always answered in the ways that we would most like. Family and friends die; the disabled remain so; believers are not always protected from mishap or disease. Yet the covenant relationship which we have with God encourages us to still pray and trust.

'Faith', claims St. Paul, is both a fruit and a gift of God's Spirit. When the disciples asked Jesus: "*increase our faith*" [Lk.17:5], they were perhaps expecting him to perform a miracle within their minds. Instead, Jesus seems to tell them to 'reach for the impossible'; 'exert the type of faith that can move trees or mountains' [Lk.7:5; Matt.17:20; 21:21; Mk.11:23]. I don't think that Jesus was here telling us to go out and perform impossible miracles. Rather, I believe his words encourage us to practically 'get on with the life of faith', trusting God and involving him in all our needs. Jesus' response to the disciples' request for him to teach them to pray was the Lord's Prayer [Lk.11:1-4; Matt.6:7-13]. This sort of faith recognises the priority and holiness of God ("*hallowed be your name*"). It asks for God to bring about his rule of righteousness, not just in believers' lives but "*on earth as in heaven*". It asks no more than what we need for today "*our daily bread*". Faith recognises our sin and debt to God and others; it forgives others as we have been forgiven by God and wish others to forgive us. Trusting faith asks to be protected from anything we cannot bear "*deliver us from the time of trial, temptation and from evil.*"

Jesus emphasised that when he had left his followers, the Holy Spirit would be their ever-present trustworthy guide into all truth and in their mission, convicting others of God's truth [Jn.14:16-19; 16:7-15]. "*When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all the truth...*" [Jn.16:12]. The Holy Spirit would teach his followers what to say when they were called upon to witness. [Lk.12:12] and help them remember what Christ had taught them [Jn,14:25]. They could trust God's Spirit, as they had learned faith from Jesus, and could trust him to bring them to life: "*Because I live in you, you will live.*" [Jn.14:19]. That is the sort of trusting faith that we need to develop for effective Christian living. Our own faithfulness to God and to others is our covenant response.

8. GENTLENESS

The word ‘gentleness’ in the New Testament [*praūtēs*], is also translated ‘meekness’ in several other biblical passages. When Jesus said ‘*blessed are the meek*’ [Matt.5:5] he was not declaring that we should be mouse-like and subserviently submissive; he wanted people to be strong in faith and active but not arrogant towards God or towards any others. Meekness acknowledges the greatness and the gracious will of God yet reflects God’s mercy and gentleness in our use of power. Jesus’ humility and lowliness were a result of having his heart fixed on following his Father’s will, not on pleasing or advancing himself. His entry into Jerusalem on the colt [Matt.21:5] was a peaceful sign of his gentleness as a leader, reflecting the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: “*Lo your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on the foal of a donkey.*” His victory and triumph were brought about by gentleness. Jesus said of himself “*I am gentle and humble of heart.*” [Matt.11:29]. St. Paul (not someone one would call self-deprecating or weak) said of his own mission “*we were gentle among you*” [1Thess.2:7]. Jesus, Paul and so many of the disciples were strong, effective and active in their ‘gentleness’. The writer of Ephesians 4:2 recommends “*humility, gentleness, patience, forbearing love and unity*” as part of “*living a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.*” None of these are signs of weakness. The Greek term ‘*praūtēs*’ was used of even strong animals that are tame or of mild character. It was also used of pleasant people like good judges and leaders who may be in powerful positions yet are kindly, friendly and lenient towards others.

In the Hebrew Scriptures gentleness was praised as a quality ‘pleasing to God’ [Sirach 1:27] and an antidote to arrogance [10:28]. The lowly keep God’s commandments [Zeph.2:3] and show piety and expectancy, receiving humbly from God [Isa.26:6; Ps.76:9f; 37:9f]. James 1:21 contrasts gentleness with anger, and calls us to “*welcome with meekness the implanted word, which has the power to save our souls*”. This encourages us to listen to God’s Spirit speaking not just through scripture but through others and through the intuition, conscience and wisdom which the indwelling Spirit lights within us. James 3:13 says that the gentleness of our works is “*born of wisdom*” and a spiritually inspired gift, as the ‘*fruit of the Spirit*’ implies.

Gentleness is not self-regarding or self-promoting. It recognises the value of others, shows concern for them and raises their value in comparison to us. “*Esteem others as better than yourself*” said [Phil.2:3]. This does not mean debasing ourselves in any way, but ‘loving others as ourselves’, valuing them as we value ourselves. Paul claims that meekness has its basis in love and is in no way weak [2Cor.10:1; 1Cor.4:21]. 2Cor.10:1 calls on people to imitate the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Col.3:12 combines it with ‘compassion, kindness, humility meekness’ and 1Cor.4:21 encourages people to ‘*love in a spirit of gentleness*’.

Later in Galatians the writer encourages the church to restore people to fellowship “*in a spirit of gentleness*” [Gal.6:1] because we recognise our own weaknesses with humility and should not be arrogant towards any. 1 Pet.3:4 admires the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit and the writer encourages us to “*defend the faith with gentleness*” and correct those who disagree with us “*with gentleness and reverence*” [1 Pet.3:16]. How different from the antagonistic or sarcastic arguments and retorts so prevalent today, which can cause social unrest and distrust! 2 Tim.2:25 suggests that as a result, the gentle are more likely to convince or convert others to the Christian way.

This call for gentle meekness and considerate humanity is an important balance in a world that often promotes aggressive, dominant leadership that is negatively critical of opposition. Gentle leadership

can still be decisive, yet be far more considerate towards the variety of people and opinions in society. The Church has sometimes been criticised for the exclusivity of its claims and its inhumane treatment of those with whom it disagrees, or those it regards as sinners. This was certainly true in past history. If we learn from the mistakes of past Christians and exhibit the gentleness of Christ, we are more likely to create a believing community with a truer faith and worship, acting in ways that are closer to God's intention. Christ-like gentleness provides a far more persuasive witness than intimidation.

The gentleness of Christ is our model, not an interpretation of gentleness or any of the fruit of the Spirit that is weak or an easy push-over. If we believe that our faith is true and that the ways taught by God can build the most fulfilling life, we should be offering a persuasive witness. Jesus didn't hold back; he spoke out against wrong and taught what is right but rather than being negative or oppressive, he demonstrated a far more attractive belief and lifestyle. This was a positive contrast to the legalistic Pharisees and Sadducees. Christianity is not a weak faith; it provides a way of life that is active, positive and fulfilling. It shows us when we act in mistaken ways, but provides more life-enhancing alternatives. It is rightly judgemental of evil and wrongdoing, as Christ is, but true Christianity is gentle and lenient, while being just in the ways it responds to those who do wrong. Gentleness recognises that all are in the same boat as us, and treats others as we would want to be treated ourselves. It *'forgives others as we have been forgiven'*, without condoning wrong. Gentleness is humane because it recognises the condition of humanity, just like Christ, who as High Priest deals gently with us. The Church believes in 'the priesthood of all believers.' A true priesthood, modelled on Christ, *"is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward because he himself is subject to weakness."* [Heb.4:14- 5:2].

It is a useful spiritual exercise to imagine what the world, the Church and our individual lives and relationships would be like if we all treated one another as God treats us and as Jesus treated those he met. This would greatly change relationships and attitudes. It would unite people, make all strong, not undermine any, encourage truth and honesty, and discourage self-centred personal, national or corporate advance. It would probably advance all by bringing greater cooperation, equity, justice, peace and so many more social advances, through the love and care of all. The quality of gentleness reflects this care for all: It is not a submissive, self-deprecating or obsequious lowliness that encourages some to raise themselves over others. Instead gentleness recognises that we are all responsible for supporting each other under the authority of God.

9. SELF-CONTROL

What I wrote about myself over 'Patience' is also true of the spiritual struggle for 'Self-Control'. We all probably know the war within us between the will of what Paul calls the 'Flesh' and 'the Spirit' [Rom.7:14-25]. The Christians who I know who appear most holy are often those who often appear most self-controlled. Those who appear most self-indulgent are often those who I find most difficult to recognise as closely following Christ's ways. I recognise many areas of lack of self-control in my own life, even though I may have the outward appearance of being mild. Many of us will recognise areas of our lives where we lack self-discipline. But it is also easy to be unaware, or to justify ourselves and our failings.

There is a difference between being 'self-controlled' and being emotionally 'cold'. I've come across several Christian leaders whose ministry I find hard to warm to because they seem inhumanly controlled and organised. I know others who appear self-indulgent and don't allow themselves to be spiritually disciplined. It is far too easy to justify self-indulgence or sin by claiming that "I am only human," or that "I am what I am"... "what you see is what you get". But greater self-control would build more a more fruitful and Christ-like example and leadership in all of us.

The word for 'self-control' in New Testament Greek is usually *'enkráteia'*, the opposite of *'akrasía'* [self-indulgence]. Both words share the stem *'krat'* which means 'power or lordship'. So self-indulgence 'allows the self to be lord', self-control is 'dominant over the self'. Self-control can bring about steadfastness and self-composure; self-indulgence may seem steadfast at times, but may show its true self-centred nature in situations of pressure. Socrates and Aristotle regarded self-control as one of the cardinal virtues which allowed people to be ultimately free through exercising self-restraint. It was highly valued in the ethical and religious teaching of the Essenes, a prominent, pious Jewish religious party in Jesus' day, who criticised the Sadducees for self-indulgence. It is commended in several apocryphal writings [Sir.18:30; Wis.8:21; 4Macc.5:34]. Jesus does not mention it specifically in his teaching, but his life demonstrated considerable self-control, and he encouraged discipline in other ways.

Paul compared his spiritual disciplining of himself to that of an athlete training to win the prize of salvation, primarily for those to whom his mission was directed but also to ensure that he did not stray from the path himself [1Cor.9:25]. He earlier wrote of the need for sexual self-control [1Cor.7:9]. This disciplining of body and mind is not like that of a modern body-builder trying to impress others or themselves by their physique. It is orientated towards being fit for purpose, useful and strong enough in faith, mind and spirit to be effective in mission and in life.

Self-control is an underlying theme but not a major aspect of New Testament teaching, probably because the emphasis of biblical Christian teaching was on allowing God to be in decisive control. There is no room for autonomy of human power in scripture. This is an important consideration in the contemporary Church, which is often dominated by church politics, the economics of church-finances and survival, various mission and giving strategies, and refers frequently to secular business and leadership styles. Leaders in training are often encouraged to find the style that best suits their personality and preferred ways of working, rather than encouraging all to primarily follow the leadership model and character of Christ. While we may learn partially from many of these business principles the Christian Church should not be regarded as a secular business; God has entrusted us with different, more universal priorities and responsibilities. We need to remember that while our plans are part of our exercise of responsibility, human control and strategies do not build the Church

or God's Kingdom. That is the work of God's Spirit! Secular priorities are often not those of God. A church built on secular foundations may seem strong in human terms, but is not primarily spiritually founded, just as someone converted to Christian belief just by human argument is not entirely spiritually converted. A self-disciplined Christian life-style is valuable in giving us time for prayer, study of our faith, worship, fellowship, witnessing, work and rest. But it essentially needs true, quality time for being with God; we must remain open, listening for God's Spirit to move and communicate. If we are over-organised we may be insensitive and miss the needs of God or others. We may even appear cold and unspiritual to those outside to whom we want to witness.

True self-control in our spiritual and physical lives is a fruit of God's Spirit, where it allows God to be in control and to guide us. It is linked in the New Testament to another Greek word 'sōphronismós', which is used for 'self-discipline', 'discretion', and 'moderation' but literally means "making understanding or wise". When Jesus healed a demoniac, the man was left 'in his right mind' ['sōphronoúnta' Mk.5:15], meaning that he was no longer in the control of others, but controlled by his own senses. Paul defended himself, when accused of maniacal preaching, by claiming that he was preaching what was true, "rational" and "disciplined" ['sōphrosýnēs' Acts 26:25]. He encouraged the Roman believers to think of themselves with "sober judgement" ['sōphroneín' Rom.12:3]. 2Tim.1:7 speaks of God giving us a spirit of power, love and 'sōphronismós' or ability to regulate and discipline our lives holily. 1Tim.4:3ff encourages "moderation" as our response to the ambitions of the world and our desire for possessions. Titus 2:2 includes self-discipline and self-control among a long list of virtues, which might also be regarded as fruits of the Spirit: "*being temperate, serious, prudent, sound in faith, love and endurance... encouraging each other to self-disciplined, sound, worthy and holy conduct; reverent in behaviour, discouraging slander, not enslaved to drink or other appetites, teaching what is good; chastity, good management of the household, kindness, submissive, modelling good works and good sound teaching, integrity, gravity, sound speech that cannot be censured, giving satisfaction to those for whom we work, respectful, honest, demonstrating fidelity and being true ornaments who show God in a good and truthful light.*" So self-control and self-discipline in scripture are not really about being in charge of ourselves, but controlling our wills, lives and actions to allow God's ways to flourish and God's Spirit to guide us.

Like so many others in the list of fruit of the Spirit, 'self-control' puts others, especially God and what is good before oneself and one's personal wishes or personal ambition. Human beings are designed to flourish on earth but we do so by being wise stewards of God's world and God's people, not by domination and destruction. St. Paul reminds us, "*We are not our own... therefore we should glorify God with our bodies*" [1Cor.6:19-20].

CONCLUSION

I began these studies recognising that the nine fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians are not exclusive. Several other qualities of spiritual fruit have been mentioned as we've explored the nine. If you consider the character of Christ you'll find many other characteristics which we pray that God's Spirit will develop in us as we allow ourselves to be transformed into Christ-likeness. Other passages of the New Testament are useful to suggest further aspects of the Christian character. I would recommend exploring the characteristics of Christ's followers mentioned in the following chapters: Rom.8; 12 to 15:6; 1Cor.10; 12; 13; Eph. 4-6; Col.2-3; 1Thess.4:1-12; Titus 3; Heb.12-13; 1Pet.1:13-23; 2:11f.; 4; 1Jn.3-4. All of these passages expand our concept of what God's Spirit aims to develop within us. They include 'Unity' [Eph.4:1], 'Confidence' [2Cor.5:6f], 'Generosity' [2Cor.8:8], 'Freedom' [Col.2:6-19], 'Speaking Truth' [Eph.4:25], 'Honest Hard Work' [Eph.4:28], 'Being Encouragers of One Another' especially in our language and example [Eph.4:29], 'Humility' [Phil.2:1f.], 'Shining as Lights in the World' [Phil.2:12-18].

I guess that, like me, many or probably all of us, often allow our own personalities and desires to overpower the work that God's Spirit wants to develop in us. St. Paul said that "*if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation; the old has passed, the new has come*" [2Cor.5:17]. But unfortunately we all tend to hold onto several of the bad habits of our former selves, or the strength of our character, like St Paul's, wrestles with the desires of the Flesh, often outweighing the gentle influence of Christ's Spirit [Rom.7:14-25].

We are all different, of course, with variations of character and abilities. Some are more extrovert, or introvert, activist or passive, impulsive or meditative, sensitive or unaware, interested in particulars or consider generally etc. All our different types are needed for an effective working Christian community that has the ability to communicate with the whole world. But for the body of a church to work together authentically as God intends, we also all need to follow the way of Christ with integrity and grow in ways by which we display the fruit of his Spirit. This includes allowing his Spirit to continually refresh us. It is easy to become stagnant in faith. Regular church attendance, keeping to a spiritual discipline like daily reading scripture, studying our faith and being uplifted by devotional literature, alongside our daily times for prayer, are all useful in our spiritual development. But we can also challenge ourselves by occasionally changing our habits: reading works that offer different perspectives on faith, not just our favourite authors or themes; exploring the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament; trying new experiences that might uplift us spiritually and expand our faith; studying new aspects of our faith. Just as we grow healthy by having a varied diet, we grow spiritually by varying our spiritual nourishment. However, it is also possible to go too far the other way and change our spiritual nourishment as often as some change clothes according to fashion. Heb.13:9 and Eph.4:14 warn against constantly seeking new, spiritual experiences like running after butterflies; this can make us unstable or diffuse our energies too much. There is a constancy and stability about spiritually secure Christians which makes them personally strong to withstand the difficulties of life, and enable them to be strong foundations or buttresses for a church community.

Christ is the foundation on whom the whole Church is built, and Christ's character and activity is the model on which all our individual and corporate lives should be built. Jesus called us to "*be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect*" [Matt.5:48]. Achieving that seems impossible, but imitating Christ is possible. How we live out the serious responsibilities with which God entrusts us will differ for every one of us. But to succeed, Christ calls his followers to allow ourselves to be transformed by his Spirit and to challenge others, bringing the best out of all. To be true to God's call, none should be

weak in discipleship or weak in our understanding, teaching and learning; no church or individual Christian should be un-Christ-like. The Bible suggests that God made human beings to be the pinnacle of Creation. Christ died to make transformation and restoration by his Spirit possible. God's Spirit indwells us to give us the power for transformation. With God's perfection to guide us, as exemplified in Jesus and guided by his teachings how can any Christian be content with a mediocre response to God's grace and love?

None of us will ever achieve perfection or Christ-likeness in this life; we will never see the fully-realised Kingdom of God in our present world. But we can build our faith wisely to work at improvement; to fulfil our potential, allowing God to increase our spiritual enthusiasm and effectiveness. We can help God's Spirit's work by extra focus on prayer, exploring our Bibles and challenging Christian books to deepen our understanding and faith, worshipping with increased integrity and fervour, living out our faith, encouraging other Christians and being encouraged by them. All these are incentives to more faithful Christian living but there is no substitute for spending substantial and quality time in the presence of God asking God to reveal truth and being open to receive, learn and be guided. We have time during this period of social distancing to focus on quality time with God. Imitating Jesus in character, action and in prayer could transform us, the Church and our world!

The fruit of the Spirit and the qualities called the 'armour of God' in Ephesians 6:10-18 give us principles to work towards. All mature Christians should aim to, as that 'armour' described in Ephesians reminds us: *'stand firm in our faith, secure that we have the truth, living righteously, prepared in any situation to share our faith, bringing the peace of Christ to others, feeling secure in Christ's gift of salvation, thoroughly knowing the Word of God which his Spirit has given to empower and teach us.'* If we work at all these with God's Spirit's help, as with the fruit of the Spirit, there will be nothing mediocre about our faith or the way we live it out.

As the body of Christ we can encourage one another to be Christ-like and fulfil the work Christ calls us to do. That is the purpose of being one body. I've heard the activity of many churches compared to a football match - 'thousands of people who desperately need to exercise, watching 22 people running their socks off who desperately need a rest!' When we all aim to grow in faith we work together better as a Church, spiritually enthused by each other, recognising Christ's transformation in each other. No Christian or church must remain static. Imitating and following Jesus and letting his Spirit grow the fruit of his character in us leads to spiritual growth and effective mission. We'll never convince the world of Christ's transforming truth if transformation isn't seen in us. May God guide us all towards meaningful, prayerful, loving and transformational fruitfulness!