

SERMON 19.5.19 GALATIANS 5. 13-26 TRANSFORMING SPIRIT ALL SAINTS

Last summer for the first time David and I went to the Malvern Wells Summer Fete. Dave encouraged us St Andrew's folks to support it. We hadn't even known that community field in Assarts Lane existed, before, though we've lived here for over 40 years! We had a great time, and one of the events I really enjoyed watching was the Tug of War! As I remember, a gang of seasoned locals easily won against Dave's motley team! (Here's his picture of the youth challenge.)

We've just heard, in the reading from Galatians, about the Tug of War that takes place daily, even hourly, inside each one of us who is seeking to follow Jesus. Paul describes it as our sinful nature being in a tug of war with the Holy Spirit. He says the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that we do not do what we want.

That description immediately reminded me of Sunday mornings long ago when our children were little, a scenario I think most parents will recognise. You want to go to church as a happy family, expectantly but calmly, and to get there in good time, eager for a special encounter with Jesus! What actually happens is that the children aren't ready or don't want to go, the baby fills her nappy just as you're leaving, you can't find your keys, the phone rings, the car won't start, and everyone ends up cross, shouting at one another or crying. You finally arrive, if you make it at all, late, in disarray, and in no mood at all to worship! Hopefully, once you're there, things calm down as the Holy Spirit gets a word in edgeways, and worship leads you back into the presence of God... because you really really do want to be led by the Spirit, and manifest those lovely qualities of patience and gentleness and self-control which we heard about just now. So the question is, is that sort of experience just part of the wear and tear of family life, or is there something spiritual going on as well? Isn't this just the sort of situation where we need to work out what it means, to live everyday lives with God?

I'll leave that question hanging, while we move on to look at the disturbing list of acts of the sinful nature which Paul reels off: *The acts of the flesh are obvious: 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.*

This is uncomfortable stuff, isn't it! We don't like talking about sin. And at first reading we probably feel this list is much too extreme to have anything to do with how we live. Of course it's easy to see that it's as true about human behaviour in Britain today, as it was in the Roman province of Galatia in the 1st century. We could shake our heads over the excess of violence, obscenity and promiscuity in films and on TV. We could discuss the shocking news I heard on Thursday, that the UK is the worst country in the world for drunkenness. And we all have plenty to say about the hatred, discord, selfish ambition and factions at the heart of government. It's easy to pass judgment on others. But, when we look again, maybe we can recognise ourselves here, after all. For example, Jesus said immoral thoughts are tantamount to immoral actions; wishing someone dead is tantamount to murder. And do we never make idols of our possessions? Are we never jealous or bad-tempered or quarrelsome? (Pause)

I wonder why Paul says the acts of the flesh, or of our sinful human nature, are obvious? I think it's because they usually involve doing something bad to someone else, and often in the public eye. So if we lose our temper and shout at someone, they know about it, and probably other

people in the vicinity do too! If we boast, it's because we want other people to know what we've done. If we take something – or someone - that doesn't belong to us, someone else suffers the loss. If we spend all our time polishing the Porsche we worship, or doing stuff on our iphone, family members will feel they matter less to us than these do. If we get drunk, someone else may have to support our tottering steps, and pick up the pieces. If our ambition is ruthless, others get trampled on.

It's clear these kinds of behaviour don't benefit others. And do they do us any good? Or is the experience rather like taking a bite of a juicy fruit and finding it's rotten inside? If we are trying to live as followers of Jesus, they should leave a bad taste in our mouth, and actually make us miserable, because we know we're letting Jesus down, as well as ourselves. If right now we're feeling uncomfortable about this, it's because of what Jesus said in our reading from John's gospel: part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of sin - that is, to make us aware of the things we do which are contrary to God's ways and laws. So what are we to do about it? When Paul laments this tug of war in himself, in Romans chapter 7, he actually lets out a cry of anguish! 'Help! Who can rescue me from myself?'

Here, in verse 16, he offers the solution. He says, 'Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.' But what does that mean? Are all my natural instincts sinful? The GNB version just calls it 'human nature'. We sometimes talk about 'fallen human nature', reflecting the truth portrayed in the story of the Fall in Genesis chapter 3, that human beings have chosen to go their own way, rather than live in the relationship with God that he intended. That's why Jesus needed to come, to demonstrate what a life lived in perfect harmony with God is like, and to take upon himself, on the cross, the total blackness of the separation from God which our sins have caused, so that we might be forgiven and have our relationship with God restored. So that we might live a human life of flourishing, as God intended, and help other people to flourish too.

So what does it mean, to live by the Spirit? In another letter, Paul talks about 'the Spirit of Jesus' living in us. And that's who the Holy Spirit is - we heard Jesus explaining to his friends, in our John reading, that he could only be in one place at one time while he was on earth, whereas he can inhabit the lives of every believer, everywhere, at the same time, by his Spirit. So living by the Spirit basically means letting Jesus change us from inside, to be more and more like him. As the chorus says,

*Jesus, You are changing me
By Your Spirit You're making me like You
Jesus, You're transforming me
That Your loveliness may be seen in all I do...*

And at the beginning of the Galatians reading, in verses 13-14, Paul says that the opposite to indulging the flesh is serving one another humbly in love, loving our neighbour as ourself. In other words, being like Jesus.

That's why, if we look verses 22-23, we see that it says the fruit, not the fruits, of the Spirit. They all flow from love. Patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are all ways of expressing love for other people by the way we treat them or respond to them. I like to think of joy and peace as the sweet taste in our own mouths, as the Spirit enables us to bless other people in these ways. Paul said the ugly ways we behave when our human nature gets the

upper hand are obvious. Living by the Spirit may not be so obvious - people may not realise what a challenge it is for us to bite our tongue, or be endlessly patient or gentle when we're screaming inside - but they, and we, will be blessed by our making this choice, and the Holy Spirit will grow love inside us for the person who has been annoying us, too!

I said 'choice' advisedly. Because being transformed by the Spirit doesn't just happen to us - we have to make the choice to let him do it. Did you notice that the last in the list of fruit is SELF control? We have to co-operate with the Holy Spirit. I used to fly off the handle more than I do now, but as I prayed that Jesus would change me, I realised that there was always a moment, before I let rip, and that I could choose at that moment not to proceed. More recently, I realised that I was drinking more wine than was good for me. Now when I feel like a drink while I watch Pointless or cook dinner, I resist the urge, even though I may look at the bottle in the cupboard! But I find I can leave it there, to enjoy on social occasions, and pour myself a nice tingly glass of tonic water instead! 'I couldn't help myself doing it' shouldn't be in our vocabulary. There are some encouraging scriptures explaining this. In 1 Corinthians 10.13 it says:

The temptations that you have are the same temptations that all people have always had. But you can trust God. He is faithful, and will not let you be tempted more than you can bear, but when you are tempted, will also give you a way to escape that temptation. Then you will be able to resist it.

And in Hebrews 4. 15-16 it says:

Jesus understands every weakness of ours, because he was tempted in every way that we are. But he did not sin! So whenever we are in need, we should come confidently before the throne of our merciful God. There we will find grace to help us in our time of need.

Of course we all get it wrong! But the wonder of God's forgiveness is that every time our sinful nature wins the tug of war, we can come to him and say 'I'm so sorry Lord, I've messed up again! Please forgive me and help me' - and he does. Transforming is a gradual process, as we learn to live our everyday lives with the Holy Spirit.

It's possible that the Holy Spirit has convicted someone here of something for which you need prayer and counselling, or you know something needs to be put right with someone else. If so, please don't let the opportunity pass, to ask for help.

Let's end with a time of silent reflection and prayer - slide of Fruit of the Spirit embroideries from St A's foyer - and ask the Holy Spirit to show us which fruit he particularly wants to grow in our life at this time.