

25. Fruits of the Spirit

The gifts of the Holy Spirit make it possible for us to surrender to God's love and to experience contemplative prayer. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are the fruits of the communion with God that we have in contemplative prayer. Their presence in our life is a good sign that our prayer is genuine. Teresa of Jesus writes:

‘When the active works arise from this interior root, they become lovely, very fragrant flowers. For they proceed from this tree of God's love and are done for God alone, without any self-interest. The fragrance of these flowers spreads to the benefit of many.’

(On the Song of Songs 7.3)

‘The will must in some way be united with God's will. But it is in the effects and deeds following afterward that one discerns the true value of prayer. There is no better crucible for testing prayer’ *(Interior Castle IV.2.8)*.

In his Letter to the Galatians (5:16-24) Saint Paul describes some of the fruits of living our lives in response to the Spirit of Jesus:

‘Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit,

and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh;

for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want ...

The works of the flesh are obvious:

sexual vice, impurity, unrestrained gratifying of sensual desire,

idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, divisiveness, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

I am warning you, as I warned you before:

those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is

love, joy, peace, long suffering in doing good, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ...

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.’

Let us follow Paul's example and look first at the kind of life we live when we are not living the new life given us by Jesus. Paul speaks first of irresponsible sexual behaviour. He puts this first because the way we relate sexually is central to who we are and to the way we express or fail to express love. He goes on to speak of impurity. We are aware of the harm caused by polluting our physical environment. This is nothing compared to the harm that comes from polluting the mind and heart. He then speaks of a general lack of discipline, whereby we give ourselves over to whatever gratifies our sensual desires.

Paul then lists idolatry. To find out what it is that we worship, we need to look at what it is that ultimately determines the choices we make. Do I idolise my so-called freedom, my reputation, my independence? What do I cling to even when it is clear that truth and love require me to change? He speaks of sorcery. Rather than accepting our human limitations and the mystery inherent in things and placing trust in a loving God, we can be tempted to seek false assurances from people who claim to know the future or to be able to control spirits. Paul goes on to speak of enmities and strife. We think of the terrible results of racism and of other ways of failing to treat people as our brothers and sisters, made in God's image and likeness.

If we fail to respond to God's invitation to live as branches of the vine, who is Christ, we will find ourselves acting jealously. In our insecurity, we hold on to what we have so tightly that we treat people as objects and are unwilling to share with others when love requires it. When Paul mentions anger, he is not speaking of appropriate anger, which aids us in defending ourselves and others against unjust aggression. He is speaking of the unreasonable and spiteful passion that can come over us when we fail to get our own way or have our own whims gratified. He speaks of selfish ambition, of stirring up trouble and causing strife as well as dividing people one from another, rather than attempting to reconcile them. He speaks of envy: acting out our feelings of unhappiness that others are prospering, wanting what others have, never satisfied with who we are or what we have. He concludes his list by speaking of the lack of moderation and control in our behaviour as we seek to satisfy what we see as our needs.

In stark contrast to this is a life that blossoms when our behaviour flows from the communion of love which Jesus shares with us, the way we find ourselves behaving once we have handed our life over to the Spirit of Jesus. It is to this way of life that we are led when we are drawn into contemplative prayer. We recall Paul's words, speaking of what he experienced through sharing Jesus' life:

'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

We are not surprised to find that the first fruit of the Spirit is 'love' (agapê). Paul is referring to something more than the spontaneous feeling that one associates with one's spouse or family; something more than passionate desire, or the affection experienced between friends. He is speaking of the recognition one has of the value of another person in the light of what God has revealed in Christ. He is speaking of the decision to give one's life for others the way Christ gave his life for us. 'Love', as used here by Paul, speaks of faithful commitment to others whatever feelings circumstances may cause to arise within us. He is referring to our sharing in the love of the heart of Jesus.

The second fruit of which he speaks is 'joy': the joy of having Christ living in us; the joy of experiencing his Spirit in our hearts (Galatians 4:6); the joy of knowing that we are heirs to the promise (Galatians 3:29); the joy of experiencing the love of one's brothers and sisters in the faith.

The third fruit is 'peace', a peace for which Paul regularly prays at the beginning and end of his letters. It is the peace we experience when we are in the right relationship with God and are living the life of Christ. It is highlighted in the post-resurrection Gospel narratives (John 14:27; 20:19). It is a harmony that is experienced in every dimension of our lives as Christ's redeeming love gradually transforms our whole being: our soul, our heart, our mind, and our body. It finds expression in the community when differences are no longer sources of injustice or insecurity, but variations that enrich the community as various instruments enrich an orchestra. It will be complete only when all creation unites in a cosmic hymn of praise.

The fourth fruit is 'long suffering in doing good.' This is sometimes translated as 'patience'. It is not the patience of bearing the burdens which life places upon us. Rather it is the patience of continuing to do good, even when it is hard and causes us to suffer, and when we do not see the fruits of our good deeds. Paul is speaking of the passion of love that is determined and persistent and cares enough not to stand back while someone is destroying himself or herself through sin. It is a fruit of the Spirit because it can come only from God; it is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus' giving of his life for us on the cross.

The fifth fruit, 'kindness', refers to whatever is pleasing, desirable, useful, lovely, valuable and morally good. Matthew associates it with the yoke of Jesus as against the yoke of the law

(Matthew 11:30), and for Luke it is characteristic of God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and selfish' (Luke 6:35).

Closely associated with kindness is the next fruit, 'goodness': a disposition by which one is ready to do good to others (see 1Thessalonians 5:15). God is 'faithful': his love and his promises will never be withdrawn. One who lives by the Spirit of Christ shares also in this quality, as also in the 'gentleness' characteristic of the heart of Jesus (Matthew 11:28-29).

'Self-control' was considered a most important virtue in the Greek world. For Paul it too is a fruit of the Spirit in that the mastery over one's wayward desires is not something we achieve on our own. Rather, it comes from belonging to Christ. Paul is speaking not of control *by* the self, but of giving over control of the self to movements of grace inspired by the Spirit of Jesus.

Looking back over this list we become conscious of an important and fundamental dimension of Christian morality. Paul does not take away the Jewish law to replace it with a Christian equivalent. The command is not directly to follow certain precepts: it is to 'walk by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:16), to be 'led by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:18). If we do this, the Spirit will cause the above fruits to grow in our lives. We are reminded of Paul's words to the Thessalonians: 'He who calls you is faithful, and will do it' (1 Thessalonians 5:24). Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us.

Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self; it is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with faith, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis. If we are concerned that we are sinning, the answer is not to subject ourselves to a system that is outside us. That will not give us the life we seek. The answer is to become more and more a 'servant of Christ' (Galatians 1:10), more and more allowing his Spirit to penetrate every aspect of our life. To 'belong to Christ' (Galatians 3:29) demands, of course, that we are ready to die with him on the cross (Galatians 2:20), dying to our selfishness (Galatians 5:24) and giving our lives in love for others. It is to live 'in Christ' (Galatians 2:16-17; 3:26-28; 5:6). It is to 'put on Christ' (Galatians 4:6). It is to have Christ as my Lord (Galatians 1:3,10) and my Redeemer (Galatians 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 4:4-5; 5:1). It is to live by his Spirit (Galatians 4:6).

In contemplative prayer we surrender ourselves to God's love. This is made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love that binds Jesus to his Father. It bears fruit in a life that is an overflow of the communion of love into which God graciously invites us.

We have reflected on the early stages of contemplative prayer. We are ready now to follow the great masters of mystical prayer as they share with us what happened to them in their prayer as they responded to God's invitation to enter more deeply into divine communion.