

NINE A DAY

→ Over the last few years most of us, have become very familiar with the notion that eating five portions of fruit and vegetables per day is very good for us! Our young people have it drummed into them at school and the rest of us are reminded of it through the power of advertising as all manner of products claim to be “one of your five a day!” Or perhaps some of us are reminded by the medics that we encounter from time to time of just how necessary that kind of healthy diet really is!

.....When we were on holiday back in July, Laura was delighted to discover in one restaurant that we visited, that the “chocolate brownie sundae” claimed to be “one of your five a day!” She ate it with relish despite having to reluctantly admit that she knew that claim couldn’t really be true and that it must be a mistake on the menu, an error which seemed to be lost on the waitress when we pointed it out!

→ Well, today, I don’t want to talk to you about aspiring to include five portions of fruit and vegetables in your diet each day, however good that may be for us. I want to talk about nine a day, or is it one perhaps; – the fruit of the spirit that the apostle Paul refers to in the passage that we’ve just heard from his letter to the Galatians; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Now there’s a list of qualities that I guess we’d all like to aspire to.

.....And if you look at them closely you’ll probably see that what we have here is a pen portrait of the character of Jesus himself. Each and every one of these qualities is a way that we would use to describe the nature of Jesus himself. Do we want to be like this? More like Jesus? Then let’s explore this theme and discover the challenge and encouragement that Paul has for us in these words.

→ When we want things to grow, then the environment they experience is very important and the soil has a critical part to play in that growth. As you all know, the kind of soil that you find in different parts of the country and indeed, different parts of the world, varies tremendously, leading to various parts of this country being good for growing some crops and not others and some parts of the country being entirely unsuitable for some crops. In fact, some types of soil are actually detrimental to the health of the plants.

.....Something a bit like that is going on here in Galatia as Paul writes to the Christians there. He’s addressing a problem of bad soil, or the wrong type of soil. The Galatian Christians aren’t growing as they should be because their soil isn’t good for them. Instead of being embedded in the soil of the Holy Spirit, they’ve somehow got themselves embedded in unhealthy soil that is preventing their growth.

→ So, what is this soil that they’ve got themselves embedded in? Well, they are caught up in the notion that they need to keep certain religious rules, particularly the Jewish Law. Strange, but nevertheless true. They’d found Christ through faith not by keeping the Law. They’d seen miracles happen because of the power of the Holy Spirit, not by keeping the Law. And yet, somehow they’d listened to the wrong people and got caught up in the notion that they needed to keep the rules in order to be right with God. And because of that God’s grace, the cross of Christ and the miracle of faith were all in danger of being thrown on one side!

.....We might hear that and think that it’s all academic and wonder what on earth it’s got to do with us today. We’re not caught up in following the Jewish Law! But perhaps we can slip into similar attitudes if we’re not careful? Ever hear others say that someone must be a Christian because they’re good? Perhaps we’ve even said that ourselves! Paul

reminded the Galatians that no-one can keep all the rules all of the time and that's true for us too. We all do things wrong and so it can't ever be our ability to keep rules and be good that will save us. Thinking that way is like saying to God, we don't need your grace; we didn't need Jesus to die on the cross!

.....Or what about the times when we think that certain people could never fit into our church or our circle of friends, because they just don't look the part or they haven't got it all together or they don't do things our way! What's that all about? Isn't that living in soil of our own creation; soil that's made up, not of the Jewish Law, but of our own unwritten rules about what's acceptable and what isn't!

.....The kind of soil we need if we're going to see the fruit of the spirit grow in us and in others with whom we share this journey of faith, is soil that's full of grace and mercy and the love of Christ as shown on the cross. That's the kind of soil, the kind of environment that gives life. When we create a soil of rules and regulations and particular patterns of behaviour we choke the life out of people. If we want to grow more like Jesus; if we want to see the fruit of the Spirit growing in our lives, then we need to be planted in the right soil; in the right environment where we can flourish.

→ Then, secondly, let's think about this fruit that can grow in us when we're in the right environment. Listen again to that verse from the end of our reading: "The Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Nine separate qualities, but notice that in other translations Paul calls them the "fruit" of the Spirit and not the "fruits" of the Spirit! It's all one fruit. Think for a moment about a fruit smoothie, or perhaps that fruit drink "Five Alive" that was popular a few years back and perhaps you'll get the idea. One drink made up of a number of different flavours. So, it is with the fruit of the Spirit. One fruit, with nine different flavours!

.....That means the Holy Spirit wants all nine qualities to develop in each and every one of us. It's not a case of you being the loving one, and you being the joyful one and you being the patient one and you being the one with all the self control! There's no picking and choosing. The nine different qualities are all meant to grow in all of us. It's not alright for me to say I'm going to carry on being impatient because I'm doing quite well in the joyful stakes, and it's not alright for you to say you don't have to be bothered with kindness because you've got the peace thing sorted!

→ This one fruit with nine different flavours or characteristics reminds us that there's a huge piece of work to be done in any one of us. The transformation that takes place as we follow Jesus goes way past just making us into "nice" people! When we place our trust in Christ and make that decision to follow him then the Holy Spirit continues that transforming work in us, but it's a life-long process!

.....Ever since we moved into Bramhall just over six years ago it feels as if there has constantly been a piece of road somewhere being dug up for some reason and you wonder if there will ever be a time when there isn't something being tinkered with. I imagine that those living in the Wythenshawe part of our Circuit are already growing weary of the roadworks which surround them as changes are made for the new tram lines – work that isn't due to be completed until 2016 and that's if everything goes according to plan. We hear people saying it will be great when it's finished, but it can sometimes feel as if you're never going to reach that finishing line!

.....It's very similar with us. The Holy Spirit has a big picture of where our lives are heading and how our lives could be. That picture includes these nine qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control growing in

us. It's a big job. It will be great when it's finished but it will take the whole of our lives. We are a work in progress.

→ So, we've talked about the importance of the right kind of soil; an environment where grace, love and faith is found rather than rules and regulations. We've thought about how the fruit itself tells us something about the big piece of work the Holy Spirit has to do in us. And now thirdly, let's talk about the growth itself.

.....Juan Carlos Ortiz, a pastor and internationally known author tells the story in one of his books called "Disciple" of how when he was a young boy, he was impressed by the fact that all the best visiting preachers to his home church had beards. Maybe not too many women preachers around in his day! And Juan came to the conclusion that if that was what a good Christian had, then he wanted a beard too. So at the age of eight, he started to ask God for a beard! God didn't give him a beard. So, then he started fasting and praying, but still no beard was in evidence!

.....As the years rolled on, of course, Juan Carols realised that beards don't come instantly and miraculously, but they come as a result of growth and shaping over a considerable period of time! And in many ways that's just like the fruit of the Spirit. We may wish that all of these qualities would miraculously appear in us overnight but this is fruit that we're talking about and just like beards, fruit takes some time to grow. Seeds have to be planted, green shoots have to be gently cared for and then some time later, the fruit eventually appears and ripens.

.....The translation of God's word that we heard this morning spoke of what the Spirit "produces", some translations speak explicitly about the fruit, while still others speak about the "harvest" of the Spirit and that's an idea that was picked up in the first hymn that we sung together this morning where we gave thanks for the "harvests of the Spirit." A harvest certainly doesn't come overnight, so we can expect that these qualities will take time to grow.

→ But, that's never a reason for us to get complacent and think that some of these qualities will never grow in us. The growth comes when we co-operate with the Holy Spirit. As we hear God gently leading and prompting us and we do what he says, then we find ourselves being changed. It's certainly not a matter of us slavishly following any rules or simply trying harder to be patient or kind. There's no joy in that! But when we really grasp the wonder of God's love and grace for us then we're motivated to respond in ways that we know will please him. Then the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to behave in ways that we might never have thought possible for us. It doesn't mean we'll get it right all of the time, but we will continue to be that "work in progress!"

.....You may have heard it said that "God loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us as we are." Or maybe you've heard this one, "I am not what I could be or I should be, but I am not what I used to be and by the grace of God I shall not be what I am now." As we celebrate the harvest together this year, I hope that each of us can look back over the last year and not only be thankful for the physical harvest that we've enjoyed the benefits of but that we can also see where there's been a harvest in us because we've changed since this time last year.

.....Over the year that lies ahead, God will continue to take the initiative in our lives as he reaches out in love and grace and mercy to us all. It's up to us how we respond, but it's my prayer that this time next year, we'll all have even more to celebrate because of the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that we have seen growing in our lives.