

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

That's probably one of the best known sentences from all of Paul's letters, and, having read it again I feel I should simply end the sermon here, because it is so plain and clear in its meaning. But please bear with me for a few minutes.

At the MMA service at Buxworth last month and on the following Sunday we were reminded by John Hayes and Peter Igo that when we look at the short passages read from the Bible at Sunday services it is always helpful to look at the context of what you are studying, for the verses both before and after the short passage may well throw light on its meaning. And how important that advice is!

I would also like to add two other important contexts when we are reading the Bible. The first is the background against which the passage was written, for within the one volume of the Bible as we have it are 66 books written by different people in different languages over a period of something like 1600 years. So if we are able to discover something of the original background to the passage it can be very enlightening.

And the other important context, if we are seeking to share biblical insights and truths with others, is our own contemporary ways of thought and the attitudes of the society in which we live.

Going back to today's epistle, I think we are used to hearing this list of virtues interpreted as being a picture of Christian life in the Spirit, as something of a picture of Christ himself and as a description of the ideal Christian life – all of which is true and extremely important.

So perhaps the first surprising thing about this well known statement of St Paul about the fruit of the Spirit, if you look at the commentaries, is that such lists of virtues and vices have never been confined to Christian circles.

Indeed many ancient writers from both the Greek and Roman worlds as well as within the Jewish nation set out lists of virtues and vices as aids to conduct and behaviour. And they are much the same as Paul's list.

But there is one distinctive thing about Paul's use of his list, and that is the way in which he indicates the source of such virtues. Most of the non-Christian writers see such virtues as being qualities for which people should strive, characteristics they should seek to develop, but Paul sees them quite differently: as the harvest of the Spirit, the gift of God.

The list of virtues contains different kinds of quality. Love, joy, peace, goodness, to take the first four, are characteristics which derive from our Christian faith and commitment and which arise from our love of God as well as his love for us. Indeed we are reminded of the ambivalence of the very phrase love of God which implies both directions: our love of God and his love of us, put together by St John in his first letter "We love because God first loved us". And these are ingredients making up our character, helping our spiritual development.

But, to take some more of the list, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness; these are more weighted towards our relationships with other people and are, rightly, seen as characteristics of Christian behaviour and way of life. And patience and self control, the final two mentioned, are part the development of our character in Christian discipleship, also to be seen displayed in our relationships with others.

So when we hear this passage read today we are reminded that as Christians we are receivers of the gifts of God, and important among them are the virtues listed by St Paul. We therefore seek in our lives to align ourselves with these gifts of God so that, God willing, we become more Christlike in our demeanour and behaviour.

But we recognize that in New Testament times and today Christians do not have a monopoly when it comes to morals and behaviour. And in our day we realise also that while much of our whole way of life has been influenced and informed and moulded by the Christian moral tradition, we are now in a society where people owe their influences to other religions and to other standards which are often equally high but are secular and non-religious in their origin. And the newspapers frequently remind us, it is almost certain that if we have a census in 2021 it will show more people in Britain claiming to have no religion than those of all faiths put together.

Morality is always a public as well as a private matter. This is where the passage needs to be seen in the context of today's world. And just at the moment we must all surely feel that the public debates of the last few weeks have hardly adhered to any coherent set of behavioural ethics. And it must be said that it is not only in political life that public debate has become shrill, personal and vindictive. Debates within Christian communities over issues of sex and gender have all too often shown the same undesirable standards.

Few could deny that the referendum debates have displayed on both sides qualities far from love, joy, peace, gentleness, self-control. Few could deny that as a nation we are now divided in a much deeper way than was the case before the referendum was announced. Few of us are surely without worries and concern for how stability and harmony can be restored and how the whole political process can regain the respect which is needed for it to work for the good of our society.

So, looking at our contemporary context hearing St Paul's advice to the Galatians reminds us of the source of our ethical and moral standards and practice as the gift of God through his Spirit. And it surely urges us as individual Christians to make ourselves more receptive and open to the working of the Spirit in our lives and relationships. And surely this week above all it urges us all to pray fervently for those in authority and those who bear influence on our society that they may work towards and be successful in healing divisions and in promoting integrity in public life.

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.* Together these add up to a tone, an attitude, a character set out for us to encourage, to embrace, to seek to apply at every level of life and society.