

## **SUNDAY 23RD MAY PENTECOST**

### Thought for the week:

"As we share Pentecost – do we need Paul's Letter to the Galatians almost more than ever?"

Do you ever have one of those moments where a somewhat 'crazy' melody line or words to an advert come into your head almost every time you think about something?

Some would say it was the "power of advertising?" Perhaps some of us are old enough to remember the slogan and musical ditty, "For mash, get Smash," uttered by weird speaking metallic Martian puppet characters advertising Cadbury's mash potato powder. To any younger people out there, yes it did happen, and to the point where people used to ask for "Smash" rather than mashed potato.



In some small way, I had a similar experience when Mark Fuller, the then Children's Worker at St Andrew's in Congresbury, and Caz as Youth Worker, introduced a song called "The Fruit of the Spirit's not a coconut" to a group of young people attending a Holiday Club. It had an almost similarly crazy catchy tune to that of the Smash Advert, that lodged itself in your head along with its similarly crazy and catchy chorus line, "for the fruit [of the Spirit] is – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self – control-ol-ol," which it repeated again, and again, and again at double-neck speed.

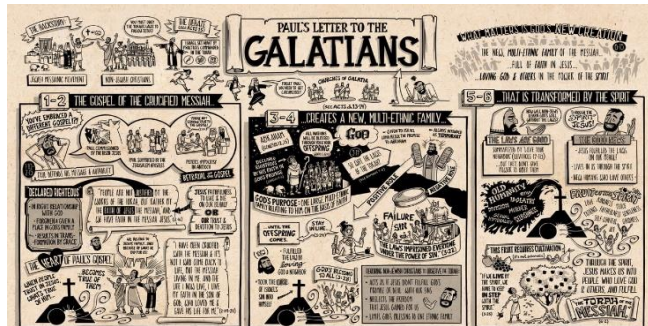
It almost couldn't fail to make one smile, especially when Mark and Caz would try to introduce it to the adult congregation. People tripping over words, getting tongue tied, humorously frustrated, and all in all having a wonderfully un-self-conscious good time, laughing and worshipping all wrapped up together. I even found myself at meetings, in seminars, and leading Diocesan courses, saying to myself, "the fruit of the Spirit is - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self-control-ol-ol... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Singing it, rather than simply verbally recounting it, really helped in terms of memory.

So, where has so much of the 'fruit' gone? As someone said to me recently, "it's almost as if people have had fourteen months to gather up all their pent-up frustrations, injustices, and negative feelings." And now that the Government Lockdown is easing, so too is the lid on so many of these frustrations and feelings of injustice as well, whether that be on the world stage, only look at the anger and the ferocity of the violence in Israel/Palestine, or in our own country, look at the anger and wanton destruction in Swansea the other day.

It can happen also behind 'closed doors' too, in people's homes – the statistics on domestic violence during the pandemic are chilling, with one in three women between the ages of 16-59 likely to suffer some sort of domestic abuse, physical, psychological or sexual during their lifetime. And it can happen in our Churches too – only this week the Archbishop had to apologise for the years of abuse of children by a leader at a Christian holiday camp that thousands attended over the years and at which the Archbishop was a helper, although he was himself totally oblivious to what was going on. Even

the BBC, which most people would look to for fair and impartial reporting, has struggled with it's own issues from it's past.

It can all seem a world away from the innocence and the unselfconscious laughter and joy of that children's song, "The fruit of the Spirit..." But for the Christian community in Galatia, to whom Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians, their world and ours looked pretty similar actually.



Paul's Letter to the Galatians pictured diagrammatically by "The Bible Project" team – see [www.bibleproject.com](http://www.bibleproject.com)

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a fascinating insight not only into the early Church, thirty to forty years after Jesus, but also into humanity and how we deal, or don't deal with difference and diversity, and also how Paul believes Christ and the Holy Spirit speaks into all this.

The key issue being presented to Paul is around how Jewish Christians believed that if Gentile (non-Jews) were to become Christians too, they should go through the

same Jewish rites and customs and observe the Jewish Torah Laws just as they did, i.e. Gentiles should embrace Judaism plus then become Christian on top. This included things like circumcision for men, Sabbath laws, and many other rules about purity, food etc.

The Gentile converts on the other hand were much less keen on the idea. They wanted to be Christians, yes. They were happy to recognise Jesus came out of a Jewish background and that the one He called "Abba"/"Father" was the Jewish Creator God, "Yahweh." But adopting Jewish purity laws and the whole circumcision bit was not for them.

Who was going to be proved right, Jew or Gentile? You could say, Palestinian or Israeli, or any other binary choice at the moment, where we feel as though we need to "choose" one group or the other, one way forward or the other, a "winner" and/or a "loser."

What's so interesting, and indeed helpful, about Paul's Letter to the Galatians is that firstly, in Chapters 1 and 2, Paul reaches out for a whole new "measure" against which to assess the situation. Rather than trying to argue simply for Jews or Gentile in this case, He reaches for what Christ has done for all people and how this in fact changes all previous categories by which we define and see things. Hence, we get language like, "there is no longer Jew or Gentile,... but all are one in Christ Jesus." For Paul, the coming of Jesus was so big it shifted the focus from, in this case the observance of the Law or not, to faith and grace. And not even just our faith or grace, but that of Jesus towards all humanity: righteousness for Paul thereafter could not then be "earned" or was some sort of hereditary 'right' (something the Jewish Christian community believed), it was now to be based solely on each person 'tuning in' with the faith and grace Jesus had in all people.

This might sound an abstract sort of idea, but can you imagine how it would change the Palestinian/Israeli conflict? Instead of needing to decide "who was right and who was wrong" in terms and categories of "Arab or Israeli," you would look to see both Arab AND Israeli as one people loved by Christ, and then, look to see, from this one people, who was 'tuning in' to this Christ-like love by showing compassion, consideration, kindness, forgiveness and thoughtfulness to the other (see the Good Samaritan story in Luke 10:25-37 for instance) and who wasn't.

These are the new criteria by which we should judge the situation in the light of Christ and, of course, there are Arabic and Israeli people both trying to reach out in hope for this new way of living too, and those on both sides who aren't. But simply claiming to be Arabic or Israeli no longer cuts for Paul, nor should it do so for us.

In Galatians chapter 3 and 4, Paul goes on to say, this way of seeing 'beyond human labels' to 'Christ like labels' is actually the way God has seen things right from the beginning, from the calling of Abraham in the Book of Genesis onwards. And he goes further in chapters 5 and 6 where he says these are the 'labels' by which His New Creation, His new Humanity will not only be measured but built, which includes therefore, it's impact upon us!

Gone are whether "we are faithful in going to Church, or not" – as if we could somehow 'earn' such grace anyway. Nor, "that we have been a 'Christian' for many, many years" – great though that can be. Its whether, given these claims, we have let Christ shape our way of seeing and living to His 'Christ-like' way of seeing and doing these things? If not, we haven't yet started. And, of course, conversely, there are those out there in the wider community who are already much further 'down the road' in these key ways than we are. Paul calls these new criteria "the Fruit of the Spirit" – "Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control."

Notice how consideration beyond ourselves and the immediate go to the heart of these fruit, how we need to see a 'bigger picture' than just whether this person is 'like' me or 'agrees with me.' These gifts promote unity without demanding uniformity, they call for resolve, for vulnerability and for tenderness and a willingness to 'hold back' as well as to act in order to maintain the bonds of love. Sadly, rarely do we choose our political leaders or evaluate ourselves based upon these gifts and skills. All too often the world laughs at such virtues calling them "weak" and demanding instead "strength" or an "appealing to principles" (thereby read the Jewish Law). But we will never find lasting peace or harmony any other way. Only if, and when, we all choose to look to the "Fruit of the Spirit" can things begin to get better.

Which leads me to the last point Paul makes in his letter, the need to "tend" and develop the Fruit of the Spirit, for they don't just 'drop out of the sky.' Yes, some people are blessed with a nature more akin to the fruit, but for the rest of us, Paul talks about "walking in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). This can be taken in two ways. The first, is simply therefore to 'try harder' – focus on 'the fruit of the Spirit' and try to do them, even to live them. But, like the Law, this only gets us so far. The alternative way, and personally the one I believe Paul intended because of all his other writing about faith and grace across his whole body of letters, is to come to the realisation he did, and that is to let the Spirit, the grace, the love of Christ come to us, and indeed come into us as a spiritual discipline each and every day. To quote Richard Rohr, the Franciscan spiritual speaker and writer, "it feels like falling, but only by falling will we ever ascend."

The wisdom of Paul's letter, the Fruit of the Spirit, and the Spirit Himself/Herself (depending which pronoun you wish to use) is just what the world, the country, the Church, maybe you and I need almost more than anything right now.

"So come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Your people, and kindle in us the fire of Your love" (A Prayer of St Francis of Assisi).

Matt Thomson

**Worship: Next Sunday – Trinity – Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May at 10.30am will be in Banwell.**



PLEASE COME AND JOIN US either physically or online as we celebrate together.

Also, we have a physical communion service at 9am every Wednesday in St. Andrew's, Congresbury, everyone is welcome to join.



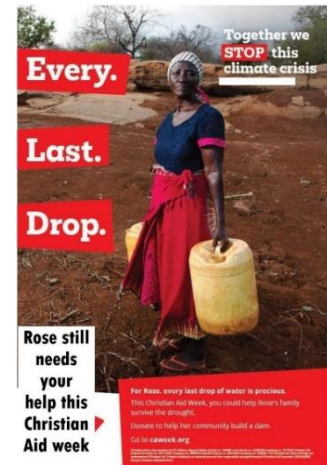
Last Sunday just gone (Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May), physically and online, was all about Christian Aid and their campaign this year to raise awareness of the “Injustice to the Poorest” of Climate Change.

This last year has been a really tough year for many charities, and Christian Aid is no

exception. But, as well as seeking to raise funds for many projects around the globe, Christian Aid also seeks to raise awareness and encourage people to engage in some of the big issues.

If you would like to give to Christian Aid to help support them in their endeavours then you can do so, either:

- By giving to Christian Aid direct over the Internet or by phone (See their website [www.christinaid.org.uk](http://www.christinaid.org.uk) )
- Or you can bring a physical donation to Church or to the Church Office over the next few weeks (please mark your envelope clearly “For Christian Aid.”)
- Or see our website: [www.newcreationchurches.org.uk](http://www.newcreationchurches.org.uk) for further details.



Matt Thomson

### “Questions for today’s Church?” (a Sermon Series beginning in June, after Trinity Sunday):

Many of us have questions relating to our faith. Some relate to issues of how our faith relates to wider issues in life such as politics, social justice, ecology, sexuality to mention but a few, and there are many others. Other questions relate to our faith itself, what do certain parts of the Bible mean for today, how do we engage with a living and loving God in today’s culture, how do I respond to those family members and others who I love but say to me “I’m not religious” and so there opens a possible sadness and a gap between us?



We would like to run a four or eight week Sermon Series looking at questions just like these, but we need some help because we want the actual questions to come from members of the Church community themselves so that we are seeking to hear clearly.

So, if you have a question, or if there is an issue that is on your heart that you would like to ask about, please can you send it in either via physical letter to the Church Office, in Congresbury (marked – “Question for Sermon Series”) or drop it to a box that will be put out in both the Churches or, alternatively, you can send in your questions via email at [rev.matt.thomson@newcreationchurches.org.uk](mailto:rev.matt.thomson@newcreationchurches.org.uk) or [kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk](mailto:kirsty.bowles@newcreationchurches.org.uk)

We will try to include as many questions as we can. We are not going to be able to necessarily give a definitive answer, but you can be assured we will try and explore Scripture, pray and offer as honest a reflection as we are able to. We are a broad Church and so opinions in some cases may vary.

We look forward to hearing about what’s on your heart.

Matt Thomson



## Annual Church Meetings (APCMs).

Both Churches' Annual Meetings (APCMs) will take place this week. These will be **ONLINE ONLY**

**Congresbury** on **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> May**

**Banwell** on **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> May**

## News from Pastor Nihad in Bethlehem and from "Immanuel Church:"

We have this week heard from Pastor Nihad both in a 'round Robin' email and also a personal email to our two churches. "Things are tough in Bethlehem at the moment. Gangs of young males roam the streets, angry with anyone and anything. Cars are burnt out and are left by the side of the road for the authorities to clean up. The Church as a community is fearful and tries at one level to "keep out of the gangs' way" but at the same time continues to meet and to worship, to pray and to support not only one another but others too who are vulnerable in the community" there.

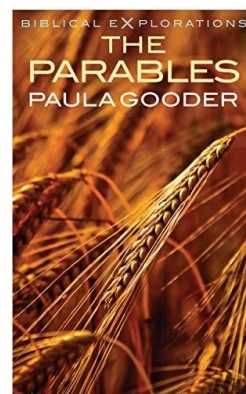
In addition, income has been devastated both by the Pandemic and now by the violence as the small Christian community relies up to 90% on tourism as their principal source of income. And yet, in the face of all this, Pastor Nihad in his email was most insistent to send us his warmest greetings and his love as we celebrate Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit.

Please pray for the Middle East, for ongoing talks both to maintain the ceasefire but also to try and find an amicable lasting way forward. And please pray for the two Christian communities we know in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem; the Arabic Christian community of "Immanuel Church" and Pastor Nihad in Bethlehem, and the Messianic Jewish Christian community in Christ Church in the Old City of Jerusalem. May we all one day be one, as Christ, the Father, and the Spirit are one.

## **NEW Daily Blog – 'The Parables' by Paula Gooder.**

This week we will finish our look at 'The Holy Spirit Seminar' by Barry Davis and move on to a new chapter in our daily blog series.

Over the next few weeks, **starting on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> May**, we will be looking at the book 'The Parables' by Paula Gooder, an exploration of the stories and allegories that Jesus told in the Gospels. Join us each day to unwrap a new story, some very familiar, some less well-known, but all with much depth and context and the wisdom of Jesus to learn from.



## **A message from Kirsty**

I know many of you have been asking after me and I just wanted to thank you all for your thoughts and prayers. I had surgery on Wednesday at the BRI to remove the right side of my thyroid, it went very well and the surgeon is pleased with my progress. I'm home now recovering, but am doing well. Thank you all so much for your messages, thoughts and prayers. I feel very humbled and truly touched by the love and grace of all of my church family. Your prayers for continued healing are greatly appreciated (as are your prayers for patience as I seem to lack patience as a patient! Please think of George and Lewis who have to put up with me.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Love Kirsty x