

Seventh Sunday of Easter ***Fruit of the Spirit***

One of the things I found compelling about the film biography of Steven Hawking was his fascination with the question of whether time has a beginning and an end. At one time in his life he believed it did; at another time he believed it did not. That alone should remind us that science consists of theories more than facts!

Many biblical writers have a similar interest, perhaps more with the beginning and end of the world and the beginning and end of human life. They take the view that the world does indeed have both a beginning and an end.

The Holy Spirit is quite definitely related to the end of the world. In today's gospel Jesus is very aware that his ministry on earth is coming to an end and his prayer to his Father is that he will protect his followers who are left on earth:

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me,
so that they may be one, as we are one.

John 17:12

He does not refer explicitly to the Holy Spirit at this moment in his prayer, but he has done a little earlier, although by a strange name, literally *paraclete*, translated as *advocate*:

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the
Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

John 16:7-8

Since it is all part of the same prayer as the request that his Father will protect his followers, it is reasonable to conclude that it is the Spirit who will do this.

Other Gospel writers are more straightforward in looking forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit. For example Luke writes:

John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:5,8

But the presence of the Holy Spirit cannot be a permanent state of affairs. This is not for the rest of time. It is only until Jesus returns at the end of time. Again John refers to this rather obliquely as Jesus says to his disciples:

A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while,
and you will see me.

John 16:16

We know from the other gospels that Jesus was quite clear that he would return and so Paul saw the Spirit as a kind of promise, a pledge of what is to come at the end of time. The New Revised Standard version of the Bible has a lovely translation of this word – 'first installment':

It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us,
by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a
first installment.

2 Cor 1:21-22

The Holy Spirit is the first installment of heaven!

So this week and next I want to reflect on what difference this Holy Spirit makes. Next week I want to reflect on what St Luke means by 'you will receive power from on high'. This week I want to think about Paul's observation that

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

Galatians 5:22

Nine characteristics that all Christians are called to show in their lives.

The first thing I notice is how well this fits in with Jesus' words in John's gospel

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

John 15:4

This is important because Paul and John are very different writers; they have different concerns; they write in very different ways. But here they are singing from the same hymn sheet: what Jesus expects of us is that we bear fruit. The first fruit that Paul mentions is love; the only fruit that Jesus mentions is love. Elsewhere Paul writes that love is greater than either faith or hope. Two writers; three letters; one commandment – love.

Paul's image of fruit is a significant one. I grow fruit. I have raspberries in the back garden and gooseberries in the front. I can tell you now that the raspberries will do well and the gooseberries will not. The reason is simple: the gooseberries are planted in poor soil. It's all builders' rubble. And nothing planted in builders' rubble will thrive. Jesus told a parable using that image:

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

Matthew 13:5

The seeds wither away because they had no root. We will wither away if we have no root. Or to look at it in a more positive way, we will bear fruit, we will glow with love, if we are rooted in Christ, through the sacraments, through the scriptures, through the church, through the Holy Spirit.

My raspberries have better soil. They will probably do well – but only if I water them. It is another interesting image: how do I 'water' love? Perhaps it is about consciously and deliberately practising love. We take it for granted that practice makes perfect in every other part of life: playing the piano, riding a bike, speaking a foreign language. When we begin all those activities we can feel very self-conscious, very uncertain. After a while it is second nature. Is it any different with love? Perhaps sometimes we need to

be very conscious about loving people. But love may not be the one you struggle with. Paul mentions nine in total:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Perhaps there are one or two of these you need more of. Perhaps there are three or four I need more of!

But his is not the only list of qualities that God desires us all to have. Peter has a very similar list:

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

2 Peter 1:5-7

It is a very similar list to that of Paul - eight qualities, many of them the same, most notably love.

But there is something else that fruit trees need which Jesus refers to in John's Gospel:

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes¹ to make it bear more fruit.

John 15:3

This is not quite such an appealing image as that of watering. Pruning sounds painful. Pruning is about removing dead wood, stems that no longer bear fruit. Pruning implies removing things from our lives. This may mean characteristics, attitudes, that are displeasing to God. The truth is that for every positive list that Paul has there is a negative list. Or we can simply imagine the opposite of every fruit: not peace but violence; not patience but impatience, not love but hate and so on. Where these find a place in our lives they must be rooted out. Just as we need to cultivate the fruits of the spirit so we need to root out, consciously remove the fruits of Satan. This is the process we know as confession. There is a very traditional and very good practice of preparing for mass by reflecting on our lives over the last

few days and bringing to God one prayer request, one matter for thanksgiving and one matter for confession.

The outcome of this pruning, this watering, this growing of spiritual fruit is that we will be like Christ, in Christ and Christ in us. St Paul wrote to the Galatians that he was 'in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.' St Peter wrote that we are called to be 'participants of the divine nature.' We share in the divinity of Christ; we possess the mind of Christ and Christ is formed in each one of us.

You can do something about this today. After you have received communion there will be an opportunity to be anointed with Oil of Chrism. This is an opportunity for you to ask the Holy Spirit to work in you. Perhaps there is one of the fruits of the Spirit in particular which you lack. One that you need to cultivate. Or perhaps there is something in your life that you need to ask the Spirit to remove. Something that needs pruning. Some attitude that is wrong, that comes between you and God. Fr Robert and I will be available at the back of the church after communion to anoint you. You need to do or say nothing. Simply stand before us, open your hands and your hearts and ask God's Spirit to work in your life. And then leave the rest to him.

N Clews
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