

St Mary's Church, Denham, 8 April 2018
Nine-A-Day: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit.
Introduction to the new series of talks
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Colossians 1. 9-23 (NRSV)

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

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John 20. 19-23 (NRSV)

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

It's the most remarkable transformation:

On Good Friday the frightened followers of Jesus are nowhere to be seen - with very few exceptions. After Jesus dies, they huddle together, lock all the rooms and doors, full of fear, devoid of hope.

But only weeks later they tell others about Jesus, invite them to believe in him and be baptised. And in the years that follow, they spread the message of Jesus to the ends of the known world. Many of them eventually die a martyr's death for their faith.

What has made the difference?

Two things. In short: *Easter* and *Pentecost*.

We can see both these things in our gospel reading:

It's still Easter Sunday, the disciples are still locked in a room together, when suddenly Jesus comes and stands among them: "Peace be with you."

Meeting the risen Lord Jesus fills the disciples with joy and peace as we can see from our gospel reading. But there is more to come: "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."

Jesus is giving them a mission. That's what mission means: being sent!

But for that mission they need more than joy and peace. They need God's very own power. He breathes on them: "Receive the Holy Spirit!"

Easter and Pentecost - that's why frightened disciples are transformed into bold missionaries.

The same is true today. No, we cannot meet Jesus in physical form, but by the power of his Holy Spirit we can know him as the disciples did - know his joy and peace and power and presence.

That is my prayer for us as a church and for our parish: *"God, send your Holy Spirit, reveal Jesus to us. Fill us with your joy, peace, presence and power so we can be people who are sent to bring good news."*

Are there areas in your life where you feel like the disciples before Easter Sunday? Frightened, locked up, devoid of hope? Today you and I can ask the risen Lord Jesus to meet us again and to fill us with his Spirit. Holy Communion is such an opportunity. We stretch out our empty hands and ask God to fill us with his Spirit. And then: *"Send us out Lord, in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory!"*

We will experience the power of the Holy Spirit in two ways: One is immediate, and visible. The other is more gradual..

Think of the power of a strong electric light: You turn a switch and a room is suddenly bathed in light. All darkness must flee. All fear of things lurking in the dark is gone. When God fills us with his spirit we carry the light of Christ, we know we are his. A sudden change.

But then there is another effect of light: a special lamp used to grow plants doesn't have a sudden, dramatic effect. Day after day the seed receives light and warmth from this lamp and slowly, it turns into a sapling, into a plant and eventually bears fruit.

That's what we will explore over the next eight weeks or so: It's what St Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. It's the *Christian character* that God grows in us as we walk in the light of Christ, day by day. Galatians 5.22-23: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

So much of the New Testament letters is about cultivating that fruit! And in a sense, everything else follows from that! We can have the grandest vision as a church but if we don't become people who show Jesus to those around us in *who we are*, then our vision won't be worth much. That's why we are committing ourselves to praying *like Jesus*, welcoming *like Jesus*, sharing *like*

Jesus. The more we become like him, the more naturally we will be prayerful, welcoming and sharing people anyway!

Children take after their parents - that's no secret. They imitate what they see - the good stuff and sadly also the bad stuff. That's why "Don't do as I do, do as I say!" never works! We become like the person we are with.

Often couples who have been married for a long time seem to become more and more like each other. We become like the person we are with!

I sometimes even think that dogs and their owners become more and more like each other! Has anyone else noticed? We become like the person we are with.

That's why the Bible exhorts us: Live by the Spirit! Remain in Christ! Place yourself under God's growth lamp and he will grow a Christ-like character in you - the fruit of the Spirit.

In his letters, St Paul expressed how he felt like a mother to the fledgling churches he wrote to. Paul longed that Christian believers should be so filled with the Holy Spirit that actually Christ himself would be shaping their whole lives from the inside out.

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. **Now we can make two mistakes** when we read this list.

The first one is to read it like a list of virtues - which in a sense it is – and then we try very very hard to be a little bit more like that. 'Pull yourself together Christoph. If you try really hard you can be more patient!'

One very real danger in living the Christian life is *legalism*: trying very hard to keep all the rules. I talked to someone recently who told me that in their primary school they had a chart with a stairway to heaven, on it little angels, one for each pupil. When they were 'good', gave to charity, etc., their angel would move up a step, closer to heaven. But the point of Christianity is that we aren't able to make our way up to God in our own strength – that's why God came down to us in Jesus!

No, the key to living the Christian life is in the word *fruit*. Fruit is the *natural* product of life. (*gets out tangerine*)

Christopher Wright says: "These are the qualities that God himself will produce in a person's everyday ordinary human life because the life of God himself is at work within them. Fruit takes time. Character takes time. A lifetime in fact."

Some of us here today are probably struggling with legalism - either condemnation ('I can never be good enough!') or pride ('I'm doing all right – God should be pleased with me!').

The second mistake we can make is the opposite of legalism - it's licence: We look at the list and pick one or two favourites: 'Well, I am pretty good at being kind and gentle, so I'm ok. I'll let other

people worry about the rest.’ But here is a fascinating observation: When Paul talks about the fruit of the spirit, the word *fruit* is singular: *one* fruit. The fruit of the Spirit *is*... We can’t pick and choose.

It’s one fruit - just as this tangerine is *one* fruit (*peel*). And this fruit has a number of segments (*pull off segments*) - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

It worked perfectly at PCC on Tuesday when my tangerine had exactly nine segments – some seem to have nine, others ten! Of course we will observe more growth in some of these character traits than others. But God wants to grow the whole fruit in us!

Jesus displayed all these nine traits perfectly. And we are called to become more and more like him. Nine-a-day, *that’s* the standard. Not five-a-day. Or six-a-day.

Our mission is to introduce people to Jesus and we will do that best when they see Jesus in us.

That’s why St Paul prays for the Christians in Colossae (in our first reading) that they might be filled with God’s Spirit, with the knowledge of his will so that they lead lives worthy of Jesus and bear good fruit in their lives.

I look forward to this journey with you through the nine components, nine tangerine segments of spiritual fruit over the

next weeks. If you miss a talk you can listen to it on our website, or listen again. I'd also love to hear from you what helps *you* to become more like Jesus. Do take away a tangerine at the end of the service and as you eat it check out how many slices there are. Nine-a-day!

At Messy Church two weeks ago we told the story of Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem and how people laid down their cloaks for him. Suddenly one little boy got up, ran out of the room and he came back with his coat and laid it on the floor - for Jesus. He wanted to be near Jesus. He wanted *his* coat to be part of the welcome for Jesus.

May we become like little children, who want to be in the presence of Jesus.

Easter and Pentecost. Not legalism or licence. Instead: the fruit of the Spirit.

As we finish, I am going to pray a prayer that the late John Stott prayed every day when he first woke up in the morning. It's not surprising that many people said he was the most Christ-like person they ever met: *"Heavenly Father, I pray that this day I may live in your presence and please you more and more. Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you. Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Amen"*