

Fruit of the Spirit. Peace
(Psalm 4. Phillipians 4 v 2-9)

Peace is an elusive commodity. Can anyone remember a year in living memory that we didn't know of war in some part of the world? Peace is often hard to find and difficult to keep. And sometimes it is mysterious. Sometimes you'll meet or know someone for whom everything is going well yet they are anxious, troubled, depressed. Other times you'll come across someone with plenty of reason to be concerned yet they seem calm and good humoured!

We've been thinking about the fruits of the Holy Spirit, the natural results of a Christian living close to the Lord Jesus and we've reflected that in the deepest sense qualities like love, joy and peace come from beyond ourselves. There is a quality of sacrificial love that comes straight from the Father's heart, saving us and healing us. There is joy in knowing and serving Him through Christ our Saviour. And there is a peace that passes understanding which Christians can know when we are submitted to His will.

It's not that we'll never experience natural fear or concern, grief or indignation. Jesus felt all of these while on earth. But in all the circumstances of life His followers can know a calm assurance, a courage and sense of well being from beyond ourselves as we trust in the Lord Who is compassionate, gracious and in control. His Spirit, living in our hearts, can bring to us a profound sense of peace.

For a Christian, this peace from God is primarily peace with God, for through trusting in Jesus as Saviour we have been reconciled to our Maker. Forgiven and cleansed, declared acceptable to Him, there is now therefore no condemnation for Christians who follow the way of His Spirit instead of the ways of this world.

Not only does the Spirit assure us of salvation, that we are justified before God like this, He assures us we are safe in His keeping. The Old Testament Psalmist lay down for a good night's sleep,

untroubled, not wasting time being jealous of his wealthy sceptic neighbours. He felt confident God would prove merciful and provide his needs. The Lord Jesus said He is the Good Shepherd, that no one can pluck us out of His hand. We are eternally secure in His care and keeping. Even though Paul was imprisoned, awaiting execution when he wrote the words we quoted earlier, he was in perfect peace, confident that God the Almighty would work all things together for good for those who love Him. Peace does not consist of having everything nice and comfortable – it comes when we recognise and submit to God's will and plan for our lives.

The peace of God, the peace the Spirit would bring also has a bearing on our relationships with one another. The Lord, the Spirit desires harmony within the church fellowship. We should listen as He prompts us to mutual love, respect, forgiveness and co-operation.

Hence Paul's instructions to a couple of individuals in Philippi who are struggling to get along. He doesn't take sides. He affirms them both as Christians, fellow church builders, sisters who will share heaven one day. But pleads with them to agree in the Lord. Maybe they had to agree to differ about some other things. But do it without acrimony which could divide the fellowship and spoil their witness. And affirm what unites them, namely their Saviour. It's hard to progress the Lord's work where there's friction. Paul urges that in the Church we employ a little gentleness.

The Lord grants His people peace. Peace with Himself through Christ in Whom our sins are forgiven. Peace in ourselves as the Spirit assures us of His gracious providence. And peace among the fellowship as we unite to worship and serve Christ.

God gives Christians peace. How do we keep it? How do we practice it daily? In our reading from Philippians, Paul, imprisoned and badly treated for his testimony gives us several pointers.

One we've already mentioned – the need to foster peace and a positive attitude among ourselves. There are enough enemies outside

for church members to be falling out and hurting each other. Paul also mentions rejoicing in the Lord, praying with thanksgiving and deliberately focusing our minds to think about good things. This is not an iron-clad guarantee that we will never suffer difficulty or mental and emotional anguish. Hymnwriter William Cowper suffered long periods of clinical depression. Paul elsewhere expresses deep anxiety for some of the church fellowships he had helped found. Doing these things will not give us an easier life, but they will nurture the spiritual fruit of peace.

We're promised the God of peace will be with us and His peace which transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. We will find a calmness, a strength, an assurance that ultimately all will be well. An uncommon peace. Unnatural. Surprising. And very focussed on our security in Christ. We'll find the wherewithal to face every challenge humbly confident that nothing can or shall separate us from the love of God in Christ our Saviour.

Let's rejoice in this scriptural encouragement! In good days and bad let's celebrate every day that Jesus loves us, that God has saved us and will keep us. Let's rejoice in the Lord always.

And everything that comes, let's entrust it to our loving Lord in prayer. Thanking Him that He knows our need even before we ask. Let's bring everything to Him in prayer. Unafraid of our kind and generous Father in Heaven let's make our requests to Him. Prayer could change the circumstances. Mountains could move. Or it could change us to better climb and conquer the mountain.

Finally let's take Paul's advice about our thought life. Where do you go in your mind when you're alone and free to wander? As Christians we are never alone for the Spirit of the Lord indwells us but He can only bring peace to our minds if we submit to His will as to what we invite in there.

Paul urges us to fill our minds with things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. Would that describe the TV you've watched this week? We often discuss what makes a good movie. We ask is it funny? Is it exciting? I would ask is it uplifting? Is it true, noble, pure and lovely? Does it nourish the soul and make us want to aspire to greater things? For what we fill our minds with to a significant degree defines the people we become.

It would be so good if God's people were people at peace, with God, in ourselves and with each other. Taking on board the apostle's advice to the Philippians, let's pray for the Spirit's help to make it so.

Amen