

Revd Eileen Harrop

26 June 2016

SERMON (WINSTON & GAINFORD HC) Gal 5:13-25; Luke 9:51-62

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN*

There is a portion of this morning's Bible readings that is perhaps more familiar to us than the other parts. "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control..." It may be more familiar and more easily held in our minds because it is appealing. It is comforting and helpful to believe that we bear the fruit of the Spirit as people who seek God, come to church, or desire to live as faithful Christians.

Indeed as today's New Testament readings go, this portion may be considered pivotal to our understanding of both passages: Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia and Luke's narrative of Jesus' experience as he and his disciples entered a Samaritan village.

But we would fail to grasp what it means, and our comfort as Christians is misplaced, if we ignore or gloss over the beginning and ending of that portion: "By contrast", and "There is no law against such things".

Our reading begins: "For you were called to freedom". Then it seems to descend into uncomfortable reading. Paul adopts 'strong language', what my husband Brian refers to as 'hyper'. "Self-indulgence"; "Slaves"; "bite and devour": as Brian would say to me: "Don't be so hyper!" But the Apostle Paul doesn't stop being 'hyper', he seems to insinuate that Christians are in danger of slipping into gratifying their un-Spirit led desires. And he lists examples, which include: "strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, carousing" and so on.

On Thursday, the people of Great Britain, the United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, entered into a political agreement to decide their future by democratic vote.

How would you characterise the behaviours marking that agreement? Can any of us deny that 'strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and carousing' were among the characteristics in the run-up to Thursday?

What about the characteristics after the outcome? Perhaps the only difference is the heightened vehemence not only towards the politicians but now also towards those who had cast 'Leave' votes. Let us not deceive ourselves: these characteristics are not softened by comments such as "how sad that those deluded voters have brought on our shared downfall".

Among the divine eye-opening experiences I gained as a governing manager of a high security prison, is the requirement of Her Majesty's Prison Service that prisoners be treated with human dignity. I learnt that there was only one yardstick in Her Majesty's service to define 'human dignity'. It is that one commandment (as the Apostle Paul reminds us): "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

We as brothers and sisters, Christians in the Kingdom of God, are asked to become slaves to one another through love. We as brothers and sisters, Christians in the United Kingdom, are asked to become slaves to one another through love. We receive the Apostle's warning not to be engaged in 'back-biting', in 'devouring one another' in our hearts, thoughts, word and deed.

Among the most difficult realities of earthly life is to know there may come a time when our lives are called on to be given to the frailty of a loved one. The frailty can be so devastating that a person is almost no longer recognisable as that person. That is why the affliction of Dementia or other severely disabling condition is most feared. But perhaps you, like me, have been blessed to witness the unconditional devotion of love of one to another in such a circumstance. The Apostle Paul describes this in 'hyper' language because for those who do not understand, such loving is as enslavement to another. Yet for those who have given themselves to Christ and belong to God through Christ, it is freedom to love to this extent.