

Lent Course 2025: The Fruit of the Spirit

Introduction

So what are you giving up for Lent this year? I have committed to a number of Lenten disciplines over the decades, including fasting, going vegetarian and one year where we committed not to buying any food but to finishing everything off in our freezer and store cupboards - which made for a succession of unique new recipes by the time we got to Holy Week, mostly involving black-eyed beans!

So what are you giving up for Lent this year? It's a good question, but it's maybe not the best question. The best question is rather 'So *why* are you giving up what you're giving up for Lent this year?' Why this tradition of abstinence and self-discipline in the build-up to the holiest season in the Church's calendar?

There are biblical answers to that question, of course, as we reflect on the Exodus story and on Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. There are historical answers too, as we look back on two thousand years of church tradition. But at the heart of it is the call, in St. Paul's words, to 'train yourselves to be godly'. Discipline, like all training, is often hard work, and must never become an end in itself. It's rather the means to an end, and the end in this case is godliness, becoming more like Jesus.

And that's why we've chosen to focus a weekly thought on the so-called fruit of the Spirit during Lent 2025 – on the qualities of godliness spelt out in that famous passage from Galatians chapter 5: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control'. Each week I and my colleagues will be focussing on one or two of those qualities, and linking them with a gospel passage where we see Jesus living them out. And my prayer, as we do so, is that whatever disciplines we've chosen to commit to this Lent, they might produce wonderful fruit in and through us: that our light might shine that little bit brighter as we seek to follow the Light of the World on the way to the Cross and the Empty Tomb.

Lent Week 1: Gentleness and Self-Control

There's a lovely passage in Matthew chapter 12, where many vulnerable people – those in need of healing or release – are drawing close to Jesus, and being wonderfully restored through that encounter. And rather than press on with the story, Matthew stands back for a moment and quotes from the prophet Isaiah:

*'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
My beloved, with whom my Spirit is well pleased...'*

*He will not break a bruised reed
Or quench a smouldering wick,
Until he brings justice to victory..'*

It's a great introduction to the fruit of the Spirit I have chosen for this first week in Lent – in fact I've chosen two that are closely related, Gentleness and Self-Control. Because the Greek word for Gentleness, *Prautes*, literally means strength that is properly harnessed, and self-control, if you like, is the harness.

Elsewhere in Greek literature, *Prautes* is used of reining in a wild horse, or pulling in a sail that is flapping in a Force 7 gale. So that when Jesus describes himself as 'gentle' (or that famous hymn describes him as 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild') it's not a weak word but a strong one: Jesus is a man of strong character, strong passions, strong authority; but also a 'gentleman' in the very best sense of that word: someone who has brought those strengths under control, so that even the most vulnerable – the bruised reeds and smouldering wicks of his day – can approach Him safely, without fear of being snapped or snuffed out, belittled, bullied, manipulated, seduced.

And approach him they do – all kinds of the most unlikely broken people gather around his table - and bruised reeds are made whole and smouldering wicks are set on fire with hope once more. For this is the life of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice and joy: and for Christians to be ambassadors of that Kingdom – as we are called to be, we need to grow in the gentleness and self-control we see in Jesus.

And so Lord in this first week of Lent, may the life of Jesus flow within us, so that his gentleness and self-control might be ours. Amen.