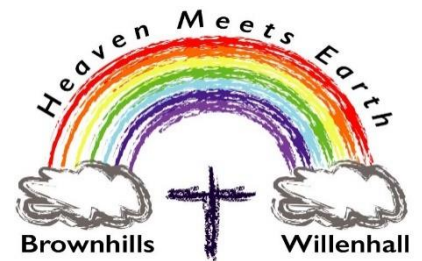


BROWNHILLS & WILLENHALL AND WALSALL METHODIST CIRCUITS

MONTHLY DEVOTIONS



NOVEMBER 2023

This month, contributors have written on a variety of themes. Thank you to all our contributors.

WEEK 1

Bible Reading:

Galatians 5: 13-15, 22-23

Reflection by Joanne Clarke – ‘The Fruits of the Spirit’

We are all fruits of God’s harvest. What fruit are you? Are you a prickly pineapple? Are you an over ripe apple? Are you a bouncy grape? Are you totally bananas?!

The truth is, just like our emotions, we are sometimes more fruity than others.

Have you seen the animated film *Inside Out*? It follows the story of a young girl whose life changes when the family move house. It is told from the perspective of the girl’s emotions living in a world inside her brain. Sometimes Sad takes over and starts to flood everyone with her tears when the girl misses her old life and doesn’t understand. Sometimes Anger is in charge blowing up everything left, right and centre. Sometimes, and you’ll be pleased to know in the end, Joy takes over and rainbows appear all over the brain world.

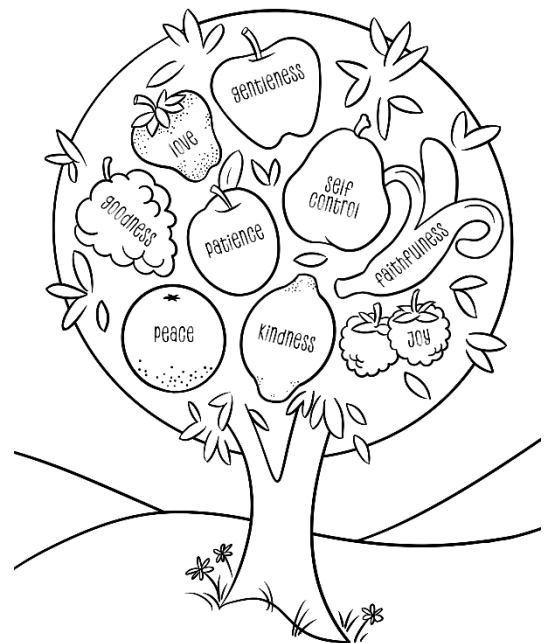
I think each of the fruits of the spirit take their turn in our consciousness in a similar way. Sometimes our patience is being tested like when we have yet another setback and feel yourself clench and think “argh why me!” Sometimes our goodness is tested when the easy route is selfish and quicker!

So we all have our own relationship with the fruits of the spirit. Some of them more of our forte than others.

But, just like the edible fruits of the harvest, it takes nurturing to produce growth and a health harvest. So how are we doing? Is there a fruit we are neglecting? And, if so, what can we do to nurture it? Sometimes, like putting the healthy food in our shopping basket, we have to consciously choose a fruit.

Personally, I think I use patience a lot in my job: when the umpteenth parent asks me the same question that if they just read their messages, they’d already know the answer to. I try to be kind to families who need that listening ear or a bit of extra attention. I think I have to be more conscious to stay faithful – making time for God in my week. I have to be more conscious to exercise self-control when a glass of wine and a chocolate bar whilst vegging on the sofa seems a lot more appealing every night of the week instead of just for a treat!

What about you? What fruit is in your basket this week?



Prayer:

Imagine a 3D apple in segments – you could get crafty and make one or get a sharpie and decorate an apple for this week! Each segment represents a different fruit of the spirit. In the prayers below I have divided it into segments that can be prayed using your apple if you want a visual focus. As we pray rotate your apple and think about each segment in turn. I hope this may inspire your prayer at home – a segment a day could help us to pray!

Dear Lord,

We pray for your spirit of kindness to overflow and flood situations where people feel alone, unheard, and ignored. The homeless on the street, the refugees so desperate they climb into a boat, the person who feels like they don't have anyone who cares about them.

Help us be more Kind to one another.

We pray for your spirit of self-control to strengthen resolve where there are challenges. When is easier to get angry than forgive. When is easier to be indulgent and selfish. When it is easier to join in the gossip or the popular opinion that stand up for what is right.

Help us to have more Self-control.

We pray for your spirit of joy to unlock happiness in the hearts of your people. Where sadness and bad news dominate the headlines. When the tendency to criticise and compare ourselves and each other leading to dissatisfaction and pining for impossible perfection. Where the beauty and wonder of your creation gets ignored and vandalised.

Help us to embrace Joy

We pray for your spirit of peace to calm the metaphorical waters of your people. Where there is conflict and fear. Where there is anxiety and stress. Where there is injustice. Where there are hectic lives and go, go, go mentalities.

Help us to find Peace

We pray for your spirit of patience to quieten frustrations. Where there are short tempers and last straws. Where there are time pressure. Where there are long roads ahead on the horizons and false peaks on the up hill mountain.

Help us to have more Patience

We pray for your spirit of goodness to inspire our hearts to give generously of our time and gifts to build each other up.

Help us to stay true to our Goodness

We pray for your spirit of faithfulness to provide a foundation of hope and trust in you. Where there is doubt and fear. Where there is a feeling of being lost and uncertain. When we stray from your path.

Help us to follow you with Faithfulness

We pray for your spirit of gentleness to comfort everyone around us. Where there is illness and angst. Where there is dislike or unease. Where there is misguided prejudice and misunderstanding.

Help to engage with others with Gentleness

We pray for your spirit of love to warm the hearts of all of your people. Where there are people who feel unloved. When we ourselves feel unworthy.

Help us share our Love

Amen

WEEK 2

Bible Readings:

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters. You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. [James 1: 19, 20]

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Make allowances for each others' faults and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful. [Colossians 3: 12]

Reflection by Karen Drayton – 'Anger Management'

Wherever you get people living, working or even worshipping together, it is a miracle if everyone gets on wonderfully all the time.

Human beings are so different, so contrary, so unique, we are all brought up so differently, that even attending the same event produces multiple reactions.

Add in a different culture, online interaction instead of face to face meetings, frustrating bureaucracy and needless hierarchies, there's bound to be a lot of conflict., which is what I have found here working on this midwifery project in India. I feel I have never had to make so many allowances for people, playing the part of mediator and negotiator and started yet another conversation by saying "to be fair...", excusing people's behaviour as: they are probably busy, or haven't thought of that, or they assumed that it had already been done, or that's what is normal here.

I've learned the hard way that as soon as you start criticising people, and then the more you find out about the actual situation, the less you wish you had said. You criticise someone for being late, then you discover their home life is caring for 6 elderly uncles with dementia and their cat just got run over before they left the house.

Or you are furious with someone's behaviour and then realise that's exactly like something you have done in a slightly different situation.

So, humility, tolerance and forbearance is the way forward. Just as Jesus said:

We need to look at the log in our own eye before getting a magnifying glass out to see the speck in someone else's (Luke 6. 41-42).

We need to get the full facts before lurching to an easy superficial conclusion.

We need to really start listening to a person's story before making judgements. We need to have meaningful conversations to really hear where people are coming from.

I've learned the happier way is not to hang on to grudges. I've learned to bite my tongue till the moment for speaking has passed. I've learned we really don't have to say everything we think!

I have had to work closely with a colleague that I have had huge arguments with. I feel she has hurt me, belittled me, pressured me. But with no choice but to work closely together, even though we now live miles apart, she is now my best buddy!

We have learned to adapt to each other's differences, different ways of thinking. I stopped letting her wind me up and make me angry, but kept my own counsel and integrity and worked on retaining my own internal peace.

I feel I have grown in dealing with conflict from all sides, rejoicing in the person God made me, and not keep bending this way and that to be what others might want me to be. I have found it so liberating to be myself, to not be disturbed by conflict, to rise above being angry and offended.

And the more I find out about people, the more I realise everyone actually needs some encouragement. It is a rare person who is fully confident that what they are doing is right. Even the most confident people need support, encouragement and feedback. So I try and encourage the de motivated, praise the small things, and choose my words with care, knowing how much words affect people one way or another.

Recently I spoke to a friend who was struggling to live with her sister. Despite hardly being in the house at the same time, they both needed different ways of being in the house. My friend was sadly thinking that she must move out. I suggested she tried talking to her sister, explaining how she felt, how she couldn't enjoy living there if her sister is the only one who makes all the rules? Sometimes it is easier to avoid conflict than to talk and listen. Too often I think we don't work at relationships, we just accept some relationships as bad. But I believe Christ wants to liberate us from bad relationships. He wants to help us make better connections even with difficult people.

2 Timothy 2.24 says "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, and be patient with difficult people"

Rather than criticism , it is praise and encouragement that helps people become better people, more tolerant people.

We all need encouragement to keep going at whatever stage of life we are at, so we all need to encourage and build up those around us, rather than criticise.

Lets make sure we build each other up, rather than knock each other down.

God Bless you all, well done for all you manage to do every day, and keep spending more time with our Amazing God, who loves us beyond measure, wherever we are.

Song: 'Lord, I come to you' (Geoff Bullock © 1992 Word Music LLC)

*Lord I come to you
Let my heart be changed, renewed
Flowing from the grace
That I've found in you.
Lord I've come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of your love.*

*Hold me close
Let your love surround me
Bring me near,
Draw me to your side
And as I wait, I'll rise up like the eagle,
And I will soar with you
Your spirit leads me on
In the power of your love.*

WEEK 3

Bible readings:

Romans 3: v21-31 and Ephesians 2: v1-9

Reflection by John Hill – 'Grace'

It probably seems strange to start this reflection by referring to a dictionary. Look up the word 'grace' and we will find any number of meanings. Let's look at a few of them...

- Attractiveness – gracefulness: we might think of a ballerina dancing, or a beautiful looking girl... no ugly ducklings here, that's for sure.

- Courteous – politeness – the air with which something is done. Social graces – good breeding. We also talk of someone having airs and graces – often in a derogatory sense.
- Grace can be a feminine Christian name and we can think of some famous Graces...
 - Grace Kelly... actress,
 - Grace Jones... singer,
 - Grace Darling... lighthouse keeper's daughter who participated in the rescue of survivors of the paddle steamer 'Forfarshire'
- Grace can be a delay granted as a favour. We talk of, for example, being given a year's grace. The time allowed for a debt to be paid.
- There is the Grace that is said before a meal.
- You may be familiar with the Three Graces in Greek mythology. Three beautiful Greek goddess sisters. Their names were -Agliaia (pronounced aa-g-i-eh-aa),
 - Thalia (pronounced tha-lah-yah), and
 - Euphrosyne, (pronounced yoo-froz-i-nee). They were the bestowers of beauty and charm and keepers to the gates of Mount Olympus.
- Your Grace. The form of address for a Duke, Duchess or Archbishop.
- We hear of 'grace and favour houses. Owned by a monarch and leased, often rent free, to persons as a part of an employment package or in gratitude for past services rendered.
- And a final one for good measure – in music there are what is known as 'grace notes' that is the embellishment of extra notes not essential to the harmony or melody. Opera singers often use such embellishments in their performances.

Well there's plenty to think about, but there's one that hasn't been mentioned. Paul mentioned it though and it's in our reading. God's Grace. What do we as Christians make of this expression?

Paul explains it very simply: God's Grace, in our Christian understanding means the unmerited favour of God towards his human children – love that is undeserved. I've heard it described as 'God's reckless love'.

Words from Thomas Adams:

'Grace comes into the soul as the morning sun into the world; first a dawning, then a light, and at last the sun in its full and excellent brightness.'

Paul is quite clear about God's grace and tells it how it is: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast', ie it cannot be earned or bought.

The late Dr Graham Phillips often concluded his sermons with the words "and that my friends is Good News for you, and Good News for me."

The Good News about which Paul spoke – this Grace, is a gift freely given, we can't do anything to make it happen, we can't buy it, we can't earn it... there are no conditions... only this overwhelming sense of being loved... this is Grace... God's love, freely given, totally underserved. The hymn writer expressed it - 'unmerited and free'.

We can never earn or merit God's grace to us – Its God's reckless love to us. And that my friends is Good News for you, and it's Good News for me.

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Lord, your love overwhelms us, your grace amazes us and your generosity showers us with good gifts. Help us today to respond to others in ways that reflect, in however small a measure, the good news of the gospel. Amen

Hymn: ‘Amazing Grace’ (John Newton) (SGF440)

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

God’s grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;

How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God’s grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

WEEK 4

Bible readings:

Genesis 18: 1 – 19; Acts 5: 17 – 26

Reflection by Michael Smith – ‘Angels without Wings’

Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13: 2)

The walls of the Baptistery at Padua in Italy are adorned with magnificent frescoes, the work of Giusto de’Menabuoi, who lived in the 14th century. Among these is a representation of the Annunciation, the visit of the archangel Gabriel to Mary announcing that she was to become the mother of Jesus. The two holy figures in the scene are shown wearing haloes, as would be normal artistic practice at that time, and for the same reason Gabriel is portrayed with angelic wings. Early Christian art regarded this as a fitting symbol of the unique and special attributes of heavenly messengers, much as the messengers of ancient classical deities also travelled on the wing. The traditional notion of winged angels remained for a long time in subsequent Christian thinking, and even today manifests itself: I have a photograph of my granddaughter at the age of four sporting a fairy-off-the-Christmas-tree outfit at her local play-group Nativity celebration– and she has wings!

It may come as a surprise to learn that the idea of winged angels is not found in the Bible! There are winged figures in the mythology, yes – but these are not angels! Two words appear in the Hebrew text: *cheruvim*, cherubs- not the chubby naked babies depicted by Italian renaissance painters, but fearsome, half-human, half animal winged beings whose function was to serve God as escorts, and sometimes as guardians – such as the beings who barred the entrance to Eden with flaming swords following the expulsion of Adam and Eve (Genesis ch 3 v 24); also *seraphim*, “burning ones”, similar in function to the cherubim, but identified by Isaiah as the two winged figures attending the Presence of God near the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple of Solomon (Isaiah ch 6 v 2); however these same 12-foot high artefacts are referred to as cherubim in the description of the Temple given by the Old Testament historians in 1 Kings ch 6 v 23.

What emerges from this is that these beings *are not* “angels”. Our thinking has moved on a little from belief in winged spirits flying through the skies and in at our windows, terrifying us mere mortals, and it is right that we should dismiss these as the fantasies of medieval artists; if we place the imagination of painters ahead of the witness of Scripture, we lose credibility and turn our faith into superstition. However, belief in angels is a different matter altogether: rightly understood, too many life-changing human experiences remain unexplained unless there are other agencies at work, often unseen, some human and some in the mysterious world beyond the human. God speaks many languages, and we believe he wants to talk to us;

why should he not make contact through his messengers? And experience would suggest that the real angels don't have wings. Let's explore that idea.

Firstly, we consider the meeting of Abraham with the three travellers who visited his camp in the hot afternoon. Abraham recognises that they are wearied by the merciless heat of their journey, that they are hungry and thirsty, and need to bathe their feet; the ethos of nomadic desert life tells him that etiquette requires him to offer generous hospitality. The fact that they are complete strangers does not enter into the question. After he has seen personally to their needs, the conversation turns to the creator of the sumptuous meal – “Where is Sarah your wife?” - and the visitors reveal that they have good news for Abraham: his wife, despite being well past the normal age to bear children, will at last provide him with a son and heir. Sarah overhears the talk, and laughs! But the prediction is true, and in the fullness of time she gives birth to a son, Isaac – “laughter” in Hebrew.

All of this raises an interesting question: who were these unknown visitors? Notice the language of the text: “The LORD appeared to him as he sat at the opening of his tent.” Something more than a chance meeting is indicated here. And later, when the visitors ask about Sarah, “Abraham said, she is in the tent, and the LORD said, I will surely return to you...” In the whole episode, it becomes clear that God himself is there, and the strangers are his messengers. This is what John Eaton called “the shifting light at the border of the ordinary and the miraculous” (“Travelling Incognito”, in “Interpreted by Love”, 1994). But the messengers had no wings! They are not cherubim or seraphim, but *mal'achim*, who may be citizens of either the everyday or the extraordinary world: and it may be impossible to tell which, for they remain inscrutable, and have no wings!

The second passage, from Acts, introduces us to the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *mal'ach*; a messenger is an *angelos*, a bringer of news in the first instance, but maybe filling an active role too in the human story. Peter and John have been arrested and imprisoned by the Jewish authorities, who are embarrassed by the popularity of the followers of Jesus and are anxious to silence them. In the middle of the night the two apostles are awoken by a mysterious visitor to their cell and somehow are led to freedom and encouraged to continue their preaching. The prison guards insist that the cells were locked and guarded all night and are at a loss to explain why the prisoners are no longer in confinement! Luke simply narrates that “an angel of the Lord” led them undetected to freedom. We too are left with a question: who was the mysterious visitor? It is not beyond possibility that the followers of Jesus had friends - human ones, that is - among the prison staff, who looked the other way, or that the “angel” had knowledge of an escape route and outwitted the guards. Or maybe the angel really was from another world; either way we cannot explain the outcome without recognising the hand of God, and the covert agency of his messenger.

This is all very well, you may say, but surely things like that don't happen in the real world we have to live in, do they? Well, it is true that as Christians we are not expected to believe in magic, and we make a clear distinction between belief in God and belief in Santa Claus. But it also remains true that extraordinary things can and do happen. Some human beings have lived lives of sublime goodness, and often the trigger has been provided by some encounter with a person who might well be described as a messenger from God – human enough to manage without wings. So it's fair to say we don't believe in fairies, but we do believe in angels – some human, some probably not.

Take this one as an example from our own times. Most of us will know of the work of the Cheshire Homes, in the business of caring for the disabled and terminally ill; the story of its creation is an interesting one. **Leonard Cheshire** was prominent in the RAF as leader of the famous “Dam Busters” squadron in the latter part of the Second World War; he was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous gallantry in raids which helped to shorten and end the war. But like many serving officers, the end of the war and mobilisation left a vacuum in his career. Horrified by the brutality of warfare, and especially the use of the atom bomb on Japanese cities, he decided to try to offer something for service people left displaced and who were searching for a meaningful career after military service. In 1946, at LeCourt in Hampshire, he set up the “Vade In Pacem” community (Go In Peace) which offered help towards a transition to civilian life; the venture was not successful and closed in 1947.

However that was not quite the end of God's work: an angel intervened. Cheshire heard that one of the former members of the VIP community was ill, a man named Arthur Dykes, and he offered Arthur a place

on the LeCourt site to park his caravan. It became clear that Arthur's illness was terminal, and Cheshire undertook to care for him until he died. Many deep conversations took place between the two men at that time; Arthur was a devout Catholic, and Leonard was persuaded to become a Catholic himself. He decided that his property at LeCourt presented him with an opportunity to offer compassion to others such as Arthur Dykes who were disabled or terminally ill. In 1948 he opened the first "Cheshire Home", which ran precariously on a shoestring budget, but which provided an important filler for a gap in the new and under-developed NHS, whose limited resources could only give a low priority to the disabled. By 1949 the Home at LeCourt cared for 24 residents; at the present time, Cheshire Homes continue to support around 90,000 disabled people across the world.

It seems that the human story takes a leap forward every so often, sometimes at the hand of one person; yet that person also reaches a crossroad in life's journey, where a messenger meets them unawares, and the direction of their life changes towards the discovery of a new country. And the secret of a successful encounter lies in the grace of God and the generosity of the one so visited: Abraham receiving the unknown travellers, the apostolic church pursuing its programme of social aid to the underprivileged, Good King Wenceslas carrying Christmas good cheer to a poor peasant, Cheshire meeting the needs of a dying friend, a lady I know who has welcomed a Ukrainian refugee into her home in Willenhall. In some cases the messengers may choose to hide their identity, or perhaps don't think of themselves as angels at all: God really does sometimes move in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. Perhaps if we heed the advice of the writer to the Hebrews, and open our hearts to the needs of other human beings, we too may be surprised at some miracle to which God is leading us – with the help of an angel without wings.

*Therefore, Christian men, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor
Shall yourselves find blessing.*

Prayer (Adapted from "Prayers of Life" by Michel Quoist, 1961)

Lord, why did you tell me to love all people? I was so peaceful at home, sheltered from the wind and the rain. But you have forced me to open my door; like a squall of rain in the face, the cry of people has awakened me. They come bending under heavy loads, loads of injustice, of resentment and hate, of suffering and sin; they drag the world behind them. Lord, they hurt me! They are in the way, they are consuming me! It's too much! What about my peace, my liberty; what about me?

Don't worry, God says, you have gained all. While people came in to you, I, your Father, I, your God, slipped in among them.

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