

Like all potential clergy, during my selection procedure I was assessed under nine different criteria including my ability to demonstrate a personal commitment to Christ and an on-going history of personal growth and change. In many ways, the same criteria Paul was talking about in his letter to all of the Galatians.

I think there is an acknowledgement by Paul that making a personal commitment to Christ wouldn't be easy, that we cannot reproduce the character of Christ in our own strength. Our best intentions, will power or as in my case – New Year's resolutions which usually last five or six days at most - will never be enough. No, those changes are brought about by the Holy Spirit working within us.

To make this personal commitment isn't easy. We are surrounded by people who either tell us it is ok to be whatever and whoever we wish to be, or by those influencing us heavily to be what they want us to be. In my case it was my father.

My father was considered by some to be a 'pushy parent' helping me to develop what appeared to be a degree of natural talent on the football field. The truth of the matter was a little darker; his sole ambition in life was to raise a son who was a professional footballer, come what may.

From the age of four I was encouraged to head – not a light plastic ball which children do today, but a heavy leather football. When I was bought my first pair of football boots, with protective padding and reinforced toes the right boot was taken away to encourage me to kick the ball with my weaker left foot.

I was not allowed to do any homework until after all my drills and skill sessions were finished. It was a very rare day when I was not reprimanded or punished for failing to meet my father's expectations in some way or other.

That was until at the age of 17 when I ran into a brick wall otherwise known as a centre half built like the proverbial outhouse and ruptured my knee ligaments which, given the medical and surgical expertise of the late 1960's, ended any possibility of a professional career.

Looking back now 50 odd years later I realize that my father's anger and rejection of me when the injury occurred was an important influence in my spiritual formation, even though I wasn't a Christian at the time. For the first time in my life I was free from being a slave to my father's ambition..... free to make my own decisions; free to make choices previously denied me; free to step out into the adult world. Free to be myself.

Free to be the person God intended me to be when I was made in his image; a person who can think and reason; who can give and receive love; a person able to discern right from wrong. A person who was first and foremost free to be led by the Spirit into a new transformed way of life.

The very same life which had been on offer to the early followers of the way, which Christianity was first known as, fashioned by love, joy, peace and all of the other characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul.

And what I and no doubt all the Christians in Galatia subsequently discovered is that whilst the fruit of the Spirit may be understood as the spontaneous manifestation of the Holy Spirit within us, growth of that fruit - which my selection assessors would have called *Spiritual maturity* – is not automatic or assured. We have to be willing to train!

Becoming more like Christ through the transforming process of spiritual maturity is a life long process and as we all start our journeys from different ages and stages in our life, no two persons will exhibit the same degree of fruitfulness at any one given time.

But we can influence the outcome of the fruit ripening within us by actively participating in the process of transformation. My brother in law is a farmer and he will be harvesting his spring crop of barley in the next few weeks. But it hasn't grown of its own accord; he has been actively involved in its cultivation – ploughing the field; sowing the seed; removing rogue weeds and no doubt praying that the fine weather will continue until continues until harvesting starts.

In exactly the same way if we are to grow towards becoming like Jesus then we can't just sit around and wait for it to happen. We have to learn to be active and we have to learn how to diligently attempt to make the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit an integral part of our daily lives.

St. Paul advocated such an active approach to the fruit of the Spirit in his other writing:

In Romans 12 Paul commands us to be at peace with others and we are told to overcome evil with goodness. We have to actively plan to be peaceful and good.

We are told in Philippians to rejoice or be joyful in all circumstances although I'm not sure how good we are at making ourselves be joyful.

In Colossians we are told to clothe ourselves in these virtues – an active “putting them on”

As an aside, you might be impressed to hear that Jane pointed out to me that we can work on being active in two different ways by use of what in learning parlance is the application of force-field analysis. Yes, I'd never heard of it before either. When I said how impressed I was with the breadth of her knowledge she pointed to one of the books I have been set to read prior to ordination. I'm not sure if the Diocese are ordaining the right Ward-Hall.

So, back to learning how to make the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit an integral part of our daily lives.

First, we can work on decreasing those things which hinder our ability to be more Christ like – such as being selfish, displaying envy or jealousy, gossiping or telling so called 'little white lies'. If you're unsure about that last one remember – there no such thing as a little white lie just as there's no such thing as a woman who'se just a little bit pregnant. A lie is a lie.

Secondly and simultaneously, we can work on increasing those things which strengthens our ability to be more Christ like – such as developing good new habits – such as by being generous with our time and money to help others, taking time out of our busy lives to go on retreat; to engage more fully in fellowship events and committing to daily bible reading and prayer.

True spiritual maturity is all about learning to love like Jesus, and you can't practice being like Jesus until and unless the fruit of the Spirit becomes an unconscious integral active part of our daily lives.

Amen